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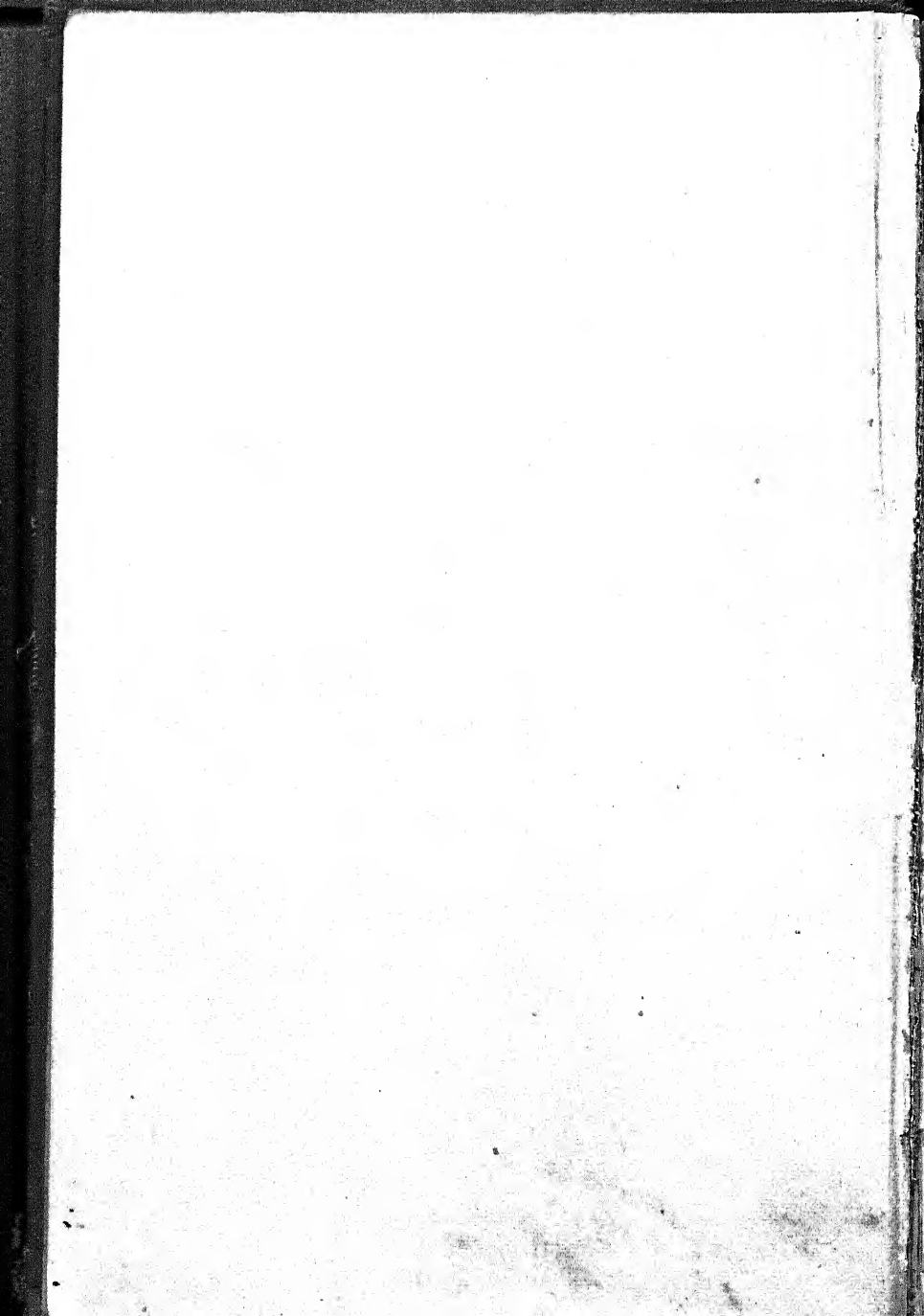
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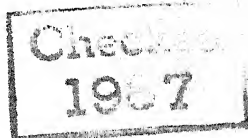
SOME TALK OF ALEXANDER



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ROGER GRINSTEAD

SOME  
TALK OF  
ALEXANDER



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To Leah

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## CHAPTER I

THEY had become such a common sight, such a part of the English rural scene, that the villagers merely gave a brief glance down the long, steep hill and then went on with their business. Perhaps a few girls with memories thrilled, or a lonely wife sighed, but only in secret. In peaceful days, perhaps, all these people had glanced in the same way at charabancs, a herd of cows, or cyclists.

It drizzled.

The distant murmur grew distinctive, then definable as faint voices raised in song . . . "Singing hi, hi, yippy, ippy hi . . ." Subdued rumbles became footsteps of marching men, dull, dragging . . . left, right . . . left, right. . . .

On they came, slowly, painfully, but ever on. Now the first solid moving yellowish block had spaces in it, atoms, human forms, tiny at first until steel helmets could be clearly distinguished as the haze of steam which drifted above cleared.

Soon it was seen that these human forms were tall and well-drilled and, in spite of the loads they bore and their fatigue, carried themselves with the grace of mannequins.

"Left, right; left, right."

In the further distance there were more blocks about to assume human shape, and further still mere smudges, diminishing into a point as fine as a needle down the long, steep hill.

"She'll be wearin' silk pyjamas when she comes . . ."

In spite of individual voices that croaked like tired frogs, somehow, all together, they contrived to blend into a kind of harmony.

Suddenly the singing ceased, leaving only the beat of hob-nailed boots.

Martin Roule perspired gently. His battle-dress collar, sticky and rough, filed away at a pimple, a recent and painful acquisition. Curiously enough, it was not at all warm. Indeed, the sun, elusive always in December, had become such a rarity that various "Piggery" intellectuals had begun to doubt its existence. To speak plainly, it was a cold, drizzling day.

Sergeant Catcham, dripping and weary, but still conscious of a

load of responsibility felt only by those fortunate or cunning enough to have acquired three stripes, once again rallied his platoon with an originality unsurpassed by any but a sergeant in the Brigade of Guards.

"Left, right; left, right."

Gelda, with all the obstinacy of a Liverpool man, continued to do it the Liverpool way.

"Your army left, Gelda!"

The sergeant, who had been limping behind unobserved, was now transformed suddenly into six feet of highly critical and ferocious brawn. A man out of step jarred upon him as a discord distresses a musician. It outraged his tidy, disciplined instinct.

"Why do you think I'm calling the time out for you? Want me to burst a lung or something?"

Muttering darkly that he wanted him to burst something much less internal than a lung, Gelda shuffled into step. If Martin's honest sweat flowed gently, his own, quite as honest, gushed in torrents.

"Only warm, like," he breathed, in accents which recalled dockyards and the masts of ships. "Some life this is. Every time the old tabs hit the deck they feels like roasted spuds bursting out of my boots. Feel like I was out blazing a trail—of smouldering holes."

"A new kind of scorched earth policy," remarked Martin, breathing heavily. How he loathed that most racking of tortures known as route-marching. Every next step he thought must be his last. But he remembered how Nobby had once fallen out from sheer exhaustion, later to collect a packet of C.B. and drills. And so after every step he persuaded himself to try another.

"Not half, and snatch it," agreed Gelda, his abbreviated chin digging a hole in his neck at every word he uttered. "Hot as the tenderest heart of Texas in a passionate embrace. Seems a long way off, does the Pool."

He referred to Liverpool. Like most of his comrades, he had developed a rare sense of verbal economy. He had it in other directions too. He always cut his corners.

"What are you trying to give me now?" demanded Hooper. "If a dirty, big, fat Jerry was after you, those dead tabs of yours would soon start moving in quick time."

Hoofer was thick-set, with heavy thighs and a large, clean face. His pack seemed lost in the breadth of his shoulders.

"The seat of his pants wouldn't hold it all," grinned Nobby, waking up. He had been marching on in a sort of coma. Slim and sleek, though wiry, he could not compete in endurance with the stolid, phlegmatic Hoofer, but if every step was agony he concealed it with Cockney bravado.

Gelda's neck would not have been considered a thing of beauty by those of even the most perverted tastes, and as it had not ceased for the last six hours to bob up and down before Nobby's eyes, his interest in it had long since passed away. Eventually, he had dozed off into a beautiful dream about a blonde he knew in London.

Though all, with the exception of a few stalwarts such as Hoofer, were on the point of collapse, most of them would have been ashamed to admit it. Especially Martin, who had an almost childish horror of being exposed as the weakling he sometimes felt he was.

"It don't half take some of you blokes for some marching," muttered Snags, the sole enthusiastic warrior of the "Piggery." It had been rumoured that he was being considered by the company sergeant-major as the next candidate for two stripes. The rumour had fired him with an even greater fervour. "Don't half take Jerry to drop in and show you how to march."

"Fall out, will you!" snapped Nobby scornfully, who had an aversion to enthusiasm for anything, particularly soldiering. "Some marching they do. It would just abart set me up for life, joy-riding around Europe, scoffing it bare and drinking it dry."

He knew perfectly well that few Germans were engaged in such fascinating pursuits, but sarcasm often carried more conviction than accuracy.

"Ah well, we'll git theer," grunted Hoofer philosophically.

"We might—and withart your man Snags bumming the load."

Martin thought of those dismal structures which inclusively went by the name of Nodds Barracks; and of a particular wooden structure known as the 'Piggery', because of the nature of its occupants. Though, in nearly two years of relentless discipline, he had come to abhor the very thought of the place, in his present plight a little iron bed in a corner seemed like a paradise

forever beyond his reach. Oh, to stop, to rest his weary limbs, to know he need not take another step! At that moment his ambition in life was just to reach the haven of that iron bed and escape from all these straps and packs, squeezing the life out of him and dragging him down.

"I was just after thinking about that new wireless procedure," remarked Dolly Grey. "They said Jerry invented it and we perfected it. Now we're after using it to confuse Jerry."

Dolly, whose body had been trudging along for some miles by a sort of remote control whilst his mind played with tender thoughts of a certain missus he possessed in Cheshire, whom the paymaster half supported for him, was, like Nobby, urgently in need of an inoculation against arguing.

"Shouldn't worry about that," consoled Nobby. "Jerry won't understand it. At least, nobody here does."

"I was only wishing someone would confuse these bleeding blisters, like," muttered Gelda.

"Same as that," agreed an individual known as the Bishop, who had a remarkable trick of blinking one eye. "I'm suffering with similar lacerations myself."

Martin now observed that Nobby had suddenly expanded to his full height, assuming a jaunty air. When he waved cheekily at a girl giggling in a bedroom, Martin understood. Nobby was the lady-killer of the Piggery.

"Come up and see you some time," he called.

Her lips moved behind the glass, but her reply, if it would ever have been audible, was swallowed up in the sound of tramping feet echoing down the street.

Susceptible as he was to the charms of the opposite sex, Martin marvelled how his comrade could manage to summon up an interest in them at this particular moment. The only thing that moved him now was the thought of that little iron bed . . . seven miles away.

Dismissing the incident, Nobby addressed the Piggery in general.

"Just abart enough to do a ruddy bloke in, all this effing comando stuff. They even gives cows shippons this sort of weather, and here we are sleeping art in fields like rabbits. Myself, I'm all for Nature—snow and ice and that—but on the bleeding pictures!



Forty miles a day—on Irish stew and dog biscuits. God! I'll soon be sitting up on my back legs and barking like your man Catcham."

"While you're at it, like, you might bite a lump out of his ——"

"Never took you to make your Sunday dinner off Bob Martins."

"If they keeps on like this it'll never take Jerry to rub me out. I'll be marching up to your man Peter at the Pearly Gates with my ticket in my mitt."

"Same as that," confirmed Dolly, implying that he would not be long after Nobby in arriving at the Pearly Gates. "And I'm after thinking it will be the only way you'll get your ticket out of this mob."

The leading platoon of the battalion was now passing down the main street of the village, hindering traffic. Some shoppers paused to watch. A few old men looked reminiscent or smiled slyly, as if deriving some secret satisfaction from their reflections, gratified perhaps that the young were even worse off than themselves. Small boys walked alongside, taking big strides.

The whole platoon seemed to imbibe something from the village air, some inspiration from the presence of civilised life. No doubt they were temperamental, as Sergeant Catcham often unpleasantly reminded them. However, all they had up their sleeves came down. Limbs straightened visibly. It was their tribute to the great English public; and that public smiled nicely and went on with its business, insulated from the marching columns of concentrated misery.

"It's a nice juicy day, though," observed Snags, feeling his soaked pants. Then, suddenly overwhelmed by pride induced by his uniform, he added: "Look at the state of Dolly there; falling away in pieces he is. If he turned sideways you wouldn't see him."

Dolly contrived to turn a sour look into one still sourer.

"Some stunt, anyway," interrupted Gelda, as if the exercise had left a deep impression on him. "Look at us all covered with mud and filth—in jippo we are. About time we fluffed to ourselves. Four days marching, then two more lying in ditches. First we're wading through six feet of water, then we're burrowing under effing mountains. Next thing you know, they'll have us growing tails and scratching our bellies."

"Old Muscles there in the gym'd just abart be in his element. 'Raising tails by numbahs. Squad—one!'"

To ease a sore place on his forehead, Martin tilted his steel hat forward slightly so that Sergeant Catcham would not notice it. Even such trivialities made one liable to be booked, or to "lose one's name", as it was called. And this entailed being marched before the Company Commander and getting at least an extra fatigue.

Each step needed a greater effort than the one before. Seven more miles, several hundred more telegraph poles, two more hours—somehow, he knew, he would have to do it. He began to calculate the number of steps this would involve, but soon gave it up; he lacked the energy even to grit his teeth. A few minutes more and Sergeant Catcham would shout with some relish "Change!", and it would then be his turn to shoulder an anti-tank rifle weighing nearly forty pounds. He groaned. Surely he must collapse under the weight of it, or sink into the ground. Yet luckily he had become less conscious of his feet, blistered and bleeding though they were in their sweaty socks which had not seen daylight for four days.

"It took Hoofer to shake them," remarked the Bishop; "exterminating half a battalion on his own. He ought to be recommended for that—maybe he'll get two stripes for it."

The Bishop, who had flaming red hair and a mottled skin, was generally regarded as a "queer hawk," for upon occasion he would astound his companions with the wealth of his vocabulary.

"No wonder," retorted Gelda, disparagingly. "He used to be the umpire's servant. That's why."

"Be Jasus, it would be dead on, too, if Hoofer was our corporal. Reveille wouldn't mean a thing. We'd get him marched in every day for untidy room or something," said Dolly, his eyes lighting up at the thought of it.

A modest cough escaped Snags at this reminder of the glory that the near future held for him.

"Some mobs march eighty miles a day," he observed, feeling he could manage a hundred himself with two stripes. "And off pills."

"Pills?"

"I was just after thinking," mused Dolly, "that those pills must have been another of Jerry's inventions we've perfected."

"It wouldn't be so bad, like," cut in Gelda, gently wriggling a bloody toe to release it from his sock, "just the weight of these straps and packs and tin hat and Bren gun and magazines. That ain't anything at all. It's the weight on my mind from thinking about it all that gets me."

"Up the Guards!" said someone.

"Up your bleeding pipe!" snapped Gelda.

As they passed a confectioner's shop a whiff of baking bread made their hollow stomachs writhe.

"Keep the step there, Gelda," came a reminder of authority from behind. "March as if you were in the Brigade of Guards—not the A.T.S. Am I yapping at myself, then? You'll soon be losing your name badly. I'll sketch you all right."

"Never took you," muttered Gelda to himself, annoyed. "Not if you were the size of three Sergeant Catchams."

"Roll on death," grunted Nobby in sympathy.

By now the first platoon had reached the outskirts of the village, and the relief from the monotony of grey skies and fields of faded green thus ended, the old depression overcame them all again. They shrank from guardsmen to ordinary soldiers.

"Come on, let your arms go!" came the sergeant's irritating voice. "I know it's been rough for youse this last three days or so—"

"Dog-rough," agreed Hooper.

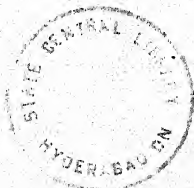
"—but, be Jasus, it's nothing to what we're going to be having soon when we goes storming the French coast. Believe me, the day's not far off."

On they went, through and out of the village, boys and men drawn from every part of England, unknown, unimportant, except to those few to whom each was a little hero or martyr.

Left, right; left, right. . . . Soon they were tiny figures, melting again into yellowish blocks, then into mere smudges. Now, as they moved down the long, steep hill, the needle point was ahead, dwindling into the grey drizzle.

"She'll be wearin' silk pyjamas when she comes . . ."

The song passed all down the column, fainter—fainter—until nothing remained but the silence of winter.



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## CHAPTER II

BESIDES such things as eight lavatories and several mirrors, the wash-house was lavishly equipped with six showers and two baths. It was situated in the centre of an interesting piece of architecture called a "Spider," and connected by passages to barrack-rooms which sprawled away from it like the tentacles of some giant octopus. The Piggery hut was in D Spider.

It was Wednesday afternoon, and only fifteen minutes since the battalion had returned from its exhausting excursion into the outer world.

Somehow all had endured to the bitter end. Indeed, when the regimental sergeant-major's voice, rasping but, at that moment, sweeter than a celestial choir, had given the final "Halt," some had found difficulty in complying because their legs kept moving mechanically. It had then been necessary, of course, to go through a complicated ceremony on the barrack square before a little man with a black moustache and blue blood in his veins could give the order "Dismiss."

Owing to the national fuel campaign, the wash-house water was cold every day except Wednesday and Sunday. Theoretically, therefore, it should have been hot to-day, whereas it was tepid. Still, water of any kind, cold water or even dirty water, was not to be despised.

"Hey! Look where you're going! Mind my foot, can't you? It's sore."

"And what d'you want me to do, like—sit up all night biting my nails? Break out in a sweat?"

The wash-house was a hive of swarming guardsmen at various stages of undress, many stark naked, revealing strong white bodies with sore patches and tattooed arms. Nearly every foot bore only too plainly the marks of recent experience, some with blisters like balloons, others red like butcher's meat. Martin was reminded of a cartoon he had once seen in the piping days of peace called "Behind the Scenes," showing someone busily inflating sagging guardsmen with bellows and returning them to the parade ground. If ever they needed bellows it was now. The

torture over, they all sagged and hobbled, searched gingerly with throbbing feet for easy places. Fifteen minutes had been ample to stiffen their limbs. Strange, thought Martin, that this cartoon, lost in the recesses of his subconscious mind, should have flickered out now. If anyone had told him then that he was to taste the reality, he would have fled the country.

"Christ!" ejaculated Nobby. "I'm just abart sunk. I couldn't raise my arm high enough to blow my nose. When she sees the state of me to-night, the girl will make out my ticket, sharp."

"She'll only think you're losing your grip, like," offered Gelda. "But what can you do? Myself, I think you are."

It was a baffling problem, but Hoofer had a suggestion.

"Tha'd better write to Nurse Perkins in *Peg's Paper* and axe her to send a confidential reply."

"Be Jasus!" muttered Dolly, undergoing contortions in an endeavour to get the sole of his foot within range of his eye; "I'm nearly worn away. If I was to be pulling the black-out cord, I'd go up with it, sure."

Martin carefully avoided the showers and waited diffidently for an empty bath. He shrank from revealing himself to the critical gaze of others, though many, such as Nobby, displayed their most intimate organs with pride. He supposed they were entirely free from inhibitions and that his own embarrassment was due to a sense of inferiority. Patiently he awaited the privacy of the bathroom.

"You, too, can have a body like mine," quoted Gelda, poking at his toes.

"I'd be all for anybody having mine," declared Dolly. "Next time there's a war it takes me to be old and fat with gout, with a dug-in job in Civvy Street."

Through the corner of his eye Martin observed that Snags had knobbly knees, and shoulders quite as bony as his own—which comforted him—whilst Nobby had a curious wart on his back. If he was hardly built for speed, one had to admit that Hoofer cut a fine figure clad as Nature intended. The air was strongly influenced by several days' accumulation of body odour.

Martin was ashamed of his self-consciousness. At times it was more than a nuisance. He could not pass water in the urinal, for instance, while anyone was there, and always before entering he

glanced furtively around to see if it was vacant. If not, he timidly retired to the privacy of a w.c., defying a notice reading:

"Disciplinary action will be taken against anyone urinating from the standing position."

"Be Jasus! I feel like a bag of aching bones."

"They just abart get me darn," spluttered Nobby, lathering his legs with vigour under the shower. By "they" he obviously referred to superiors held in contempt. "There we comes in half croaked, and then we has to go through all that bull-shit on the the ruddy square, like we was mounting guard at Buckingham Palace."

"Oh, they love it," answered Hoofer, grunting with unusual emotion as Dolly scrubbed his back. "They call it soldiering."

"Soldiering!" cried Gelda, aghast. "They know as much about the arts of warfare as an innocent babe. And did you see the scoff they got? What we got in peacetime, like, when we worked overtime. And they're that mean they wouldn't give you an itch if they thought it'd do you any good."

"Scheme, did you say?" inquired the Bishop, who shared the common view about his superiors. "Did you ever see such an infernal mess? First they disappear for about an hour, brooding over maps like a secret society . . ."

"Conference, they called it," Dolly informed him with sarcasm. "It was only a hundred square yards at the most, but it might have been the continent of Africa they was studying, before Livingstone plotted it out. And then we set off in the dark. We comes to some streets and your man Padi says: 'It's the south side we want, Perky, old boy!' Perky trys to look as if he was after being second-in-command to Columbus discovering America, and says, 'I think the arnswer to thet is yes, darling.' And then, be Jasus, they has us wandering around for about three hours finding the south side."

"And then," said Gelda, butting in excitedly, his nose perspiring, "when they finds the bleeding south side—after marching up and down a few hundred roads, like, and coming back to where they started—they comes to a big barbed-wire entanglement. Then they only spend another hour trying to find the end of it, until they fluffs it goes all round the airport and they're back again to where they started."

At that point Gelda was gasping for breath, so another voice assumed the role of narrator:

"And then they starts looking for a gap to crawl through. And after abart another hour—hey, mind my blarsted blister!—they finds an opening made by blokes crawling through what's pushed for time late at night."

They all paused, winded, both from their exertions under the showers and from talking, until Hoofer, who had large lungs that were seldom overworked in chattering, was suddenly overcome by the thought of it all:

"And after all that trouble an ould umpire marches up and says, 'You're dead, and you're dead, and you're dead.' We was nearly all dead. 'A machine gun's been splashing et you and 303's positively oozing et you for half an hour.'" It was obviously a strain upon Hoofer to imitate a Guards officer's accent. "Then another ould umpire, on their side, trots off and tells his lot where the rest of ours is."

"Be Jasus, yes. And ~~then~~ we're after meeting Number Three Company, what's been wiped out, marching back in threes singing 'Hi, hi, yippy,' and we find we've been after operating miles behind the front lines."

Such was their fairly shrewd account of the exercise.

"Some of them couldn't run a public lavatory, never mind a war," summed up Nobby, to the satisfaction of all.

When the splashing and criticisms had been going on for about half an hour and the water had deteriorated from tepid to cold, a loud, staccato voice stabbed at them from the passage, nearer, nearer, until it filled the wash-house, reducing all other noises to insignificance.

"Come on! Hurry up, there! You've had enough time to scrub a battleship out. Get outside with your rifles. Come on, now. Hurry up! You've got exactly five more minutes."

This naturally induced several comments upon Sergeant Catcham's origin, and what was unanimously hoped would be his future.

"Ould lug," grunted Hoofer.

It was the signal for several corporals to come dashing through the wash-house, echoing the sergeant's cry. From then onwards at regular ten-second intervals some voice of authority came in to

remind them of the necessity for speed, hinting at different kinds of dire punishment, according to the temperament of the N.C.O.

No small part of Army life was passed in being shouted outside innumerable times for each parade, in scrambling round and dashing out, breathless and harassed, fifteen minutes before time, as if all the sergeants had suddenly discovered that all the clocks were quarter of an hour slow—and then waiting precisely that long for an officer.

The wash-house thinned out as guardsmen limped off to their rooms. Martin, who had just begun to experiment with a reluctant toe in the cold bath, was not sorry for the excuse to cancel the proceedings and dress again.

Semi-nude bodies were now flitting throughout the spider, others delved feverishly into kitbags in search of clean underwear, and every ten seconds a corporal popped his head round the door to tell them, as if they had never heard it before, that it was time to get out for rifle inspection.

"Give me the lend of your pull-through," said Gelda to Snags. "Quick or I'll get put inside."

Snags mumbled something about Gelda waiting until he'd finished with it, and where was his own pull-through, anyway.

Usually the Piggery mucked in together, sharing all kit, and particularly Gelda's parcels from his newly wed and apparently fond wife. However, there were occasions when it was policy not to count on gratitude.

"Come on. Throw it over," demanded Gelda, wiping his brow. The least excitement made him perspire violently.

"Who's whipped my brush? I'm just abart brarned off. Hoofers, you old pig-swiller, you worked a flanker on me."

All were bustling about in quick time; all save Hoofers, who had never yet been known to exert himself unnecessarily. While others pulled their rifles through, he dressed; while others dashed outside on parade, he pulled his rifle through. Though the persistent efforts of sergeants and corporals could always inspire a general fanatical sense of urgency, Hoofers remained undisturbed. Nothing ever excited him—nothing, that is to say, except cook-house call, when he suddenly became transformed into fourteen stone of silent determination and streaked across to the mess-room like a greyhound.



"Be Jasus! I was just after putting my bolt on the bed and it's been whipped—no, it's here—my rifle's missing parade."

"Gimme the lend of your dubbin!" cried someone from the end of the room

"Your comb a minute," demanded Nobby, who was always particular about his sleek hair, whether it was exposed to the critical gaze of the world or concealed in his S.D. cap.

Snags breathed heavily as he worked at his rifle. He had good reasons for showing the best one on parade.

"Christ!" he exclaimed at length. "All I ever hear from you blokes is 'Gimme, gimme, gimme; lend me, lend me, lend me.'"

"Fall art, will you. Can't you see I'm pushed."

"Some of you'd be after taking a penny from a blind man's effing box," squeaked Dolly, "and then telling him it was a nice day."

"Wait till your man Snags gets the tapes," said Gelda slyly. "Then you'll have to start bobbing, like. Old Snags'll book us right, left and centre. Bad type."

Whisperings of impending promotion were in the air, and although Snags had not been mentioned officially he was nevertheless the subject of the heaviest betting.

"Bad type all right, considering his number isn't dry," confirmed the Bishop, blinking dots and dashes with one eyelid.

"I've got more service in than you, anyway," retorted Snags hotly.

"Abart an hour."

"Be Jasus, didn't you know? Snags was after picking up dummies when you was only sucking 'em."

"Not dummy rounds, either."

Then a roar burst upon the room and eardrums throbbed.

"Get outside now! Anyone not outside in that roadway in one second from now, I'll dive-bomb him. I'll guarantee his heels won't touch the ground once between here and the cooler."

This was no gentle hint to trifle with. Sergeant Catcham thought no more of seeing a man off to the guardroom than of twirling his moustache. Everyone fled before his wrath, Martin well in the forefront. Officers were demi-gods, whose thoughts and ways surpassed the understanding of ordinary mortals, but N.C.Os. loomed among the shades of military despotism. A general might be formidable, but he was remote and therefore

only mythical, whereas a sergeant was a real, ever-present source of oppression. Indeed, after a few weeks in the Army, though one realised that such things as generals must exist, one's mind stopped short at sergeants.

In course of time, though reluctantly, Martin had come to regard Sergeant Catcham as indispensable. He might describe the man as an old lug, or a bog man, try to persuade himself that a sergeant was no better than other men of flesh and blood, and gloat like everyone else whenever he made the slightest error; but secretly Martin recognised that Sergeant Catcham was not of common clay. The very air he breathed seemed different, if only tainted. In this world of sloping arms, right turns, and saluting, he stood supreme. And all other worlds were long since obliterated, dim memories at best, like dreams. It was difficult to conceive of life without Sergeant Catcham as the pivot, for who but he would call them up to attention when an officer strolled by, or get them right-dressed on parade, or teach them as he had been doing for nearly two years the intricacies of saluting, or warn them against the pitfalls of slow marching? Yet it sometimes occurred to Martin that, with the whole weight of the British military machine behind them, ordinary mortals might in time develop into the stuff of which sergeants were made.

"Be Jasus!" cried Dolly, stumbling through the door. "My left eg's seized up."

He had recently been on a motor transport course. He groaned, gingerly feeling his hip.

"You sound like a duck with an egg stuck half-way," remarked Gelda rudely. "Hey! Look where you're sticking those ruddy barges of yours."

This was to Nobby, who had somehow become jammed in the crush at the door, to be sent spinning into the road.

"I'm just abart brarned off," he breathed. "And when I'm brarned off I go backwards because I don't give a damn where I'm going."

In his haste, Martin had forgotten to clean his cap badge, and instead of twinkling like a star in the heavens it was tarnished.

"I see we're back on the gold standard again," observed Snags.

"Oh, you ignore the ignoramus," said the Bishop with sympathy. "It'll rub."

Martin felt grateful.

"It'll have to now."

"Roule!"

Martin jumped. The voice might have been a strong electric current jabbing through him.

"Double, man, when I call."

Martin ran, though his every instinct rebelled at being ordered around as if he were a sheep.

"Come on! Stand to attention!" snapped the sergeant.

Wondering what he was guilty of this time, or, if not guilty, why he should have been selected from so much talent, Martin stood to attention.

Then a remarkable thing occurred. A look settled on Sergeant Catcham's face that might have been described as confidential. It was such an extraordinary phenomenon, like an apple falling upwards into the clouds, that Martin was dumbfounded.

"You're pretty good at morse, aren't you?"

Such was the sergeant's magnetism that Martin would have agreed with anything.

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Do your button up."

"Yes, Sergeant."

"I suppose you've heard the rumours?"

The sergeant spoke in a low voice. Martin thrilled. Here he was being talked to—not being shouted at—by Sergeant Catcham, and though everyone could see him they could only guess at the conversation. He knew they would be guessing.

"They're going to make one of you into a corporal. Keep the eye down. You can't ever tell. By the way, you might scrub my bunk out after tea."

Abruptly the sergeant looked away and Martin knew the interview was ended. He turned smartly to his right and rejoined the waiting crowd.

It might be a great honour to be entrusted with a sergeant's bunk; it was also a damned nuisance. But what was that about a corporal? Were they considering himself for the vacancy? The mere idea was absurd. He wouldn't have tapes at any price. He could never hope to become a superman like other N.C.Os. Besides, he hated discipline and regimentation; he could never

become an instrument for oppressing others, never. Snags, surely, was the N.C.O.'s dream of a guardsman—clean, attentive, smart.

The look in Nobby's eye betrayed his curiosity, and he was obviously on the point of making discreet enquiries when a minor sensation happened to drive the thought away.

Hooper had appeared in the doorway.

Everyone waited, tensed. It was fully five minutes since they had all been warned to get outside in order to have their rifles examined by an officer.

Sergeant Catcham was observed to twirl his moustache—a sign, as those who were familiar with his habits knew, of emotion. Several corporals who had no moustaches looked as though they wished they had.

Even Gelda had to admit that Hooper cut an exasperating figure as he stood coolly there asking permission to fall in.

"Didn't I tell you to get outside five minutes ago?"

Hooper nodded.

"Yes, Sergeant, but it isna more than twenty-five past and parade's not till half——"

"Did I, or did I not, tell you to get on parade?" fumed the Sergeant.

"Yes, Sergeant."

Having gained the admission, Sergeant Catcham knew it was the only satisfaction he would get, for Hooper knew the rules as well as anyone, and it was laid down that no man must be on parade till five minutes before it was due to begin. Hooper always timed it to a minute.

"Then why didn't you get out?"

"Well, Sergeant, it wasna twenty-five past," began Hooper, rubbing it in, "and——"

"How long do you think I've been in the army, fifteen years or fifteen minutes? Fall in!"

Hooper had gained an important victory, and Sergeant Catcham felt it so keenly that, having failed on one point, his trained eye searched for an alternative. It was always possible to book a man for something.

"Your boots are dirty, Hooper. Company Orders to-morrow morning, nine-thirty. Don't forget!"

Hoofer gave him a withering look and took his place in the ranks.

"Ah well, I always git theer," he muttered. "And I'll git case explained to-morrow, 'cause we weren't ordered to show boots. They're looking for a new corporal. I wouldna have two tapes for the price of ten."

"Don't worry. Nobody'll ask you."

With Sergeant Catcham's dreadful hint still in his ears, Martin shuddered as he thought of all the complications involved in getting Hoofer on parade.

### CHAPTER III

THE rest of the day went quickly enough, as all hoped it would; particularly this one, for if every day was part of a horrible dream between the outbreak of war and its termination, they weren't always so tired and longing to get dug in between the blankets—"lapping it up," as sleep was called.

Rifle inspection was a cursory affair. Though they were considered to be a guardsman's most precious possession—by all but guardsmen—Perky, the platoon subaltern, was just as fatigued as, if not more so than, the men he led. Besides, the mess had competing attractions.

Nobby was ordered to dig his gas-port out and show it in half an hour, and Gelda had to pay the supreme penalty for a spot of dust by having his name inserted in the notorious book. Then Sergeant Catcham paused ominously at Hoofer and peered hard down his barrel.

"Bloody spiders crawling down here, or something," he observed at length.

However, it was proved by Hoofer to be no more than a stray piece of thread off the flannelette, or four-by-two, as the cleaning material was called, and the accused was exonerated.

Then having been called to attention and induced to slope arms, they turned smartly to the right and saluted. This was done by crashing the right hand down upon the butt of the rifle. Thus they remained while Sergeant Catcham counted five, and then they dashed to the barrack-room.

There was no reason for haste. Yet in spite of stiff limbs and sore feet and the barrack-room being no more than ten yards away, thirty men who clearly could not pass through the narrow door at once all dashed at it as though their lives depended upon it.

However, the torment was not yet over, for they were no sooner settled in the barrack-room than Sergeant Catcham reappeared and shouted: "Stand to your beds for foot inspection! Come on! Come on! Don't look at me like you'd never seen me before."

After route marches, it was customary for an officer solemnly to inspect each man's feet and, if necessary, to see him chased up to the medical bunk for treatment. Why guardsmen could not be trusted to decide for themselves if they were in need of such attention was a question to which no one seemed to have an answer. Perhaps it was because they were as crafty as foxes and nursed their wounds in secret until sick parade the following morning; for though this parade was half an hour before the usual morning drill, it was possible with a little ingenuity to loiter at the medical bunk throughout the period in which they should have been cutting round the square.

But, whatever the reason, the fact remained that Perky was outside the door waiting patiently to be announced by Sergeant Catcham.

The Piggery could move on occasion, and it took only two minutes to remove boots and socks. But in this short time it was necessary for several corporals to burst in and point with trembling finger at the door, imploring the men, in loud voices which Perky could easily overhear, to get a heave on themselves.

"Let the little squirt wait," muttered Hoofer, who was always touched by this sort of unreasonableness. "What d'you think we are? Magicians? I've na but one pair of hands and I can only pull one boot off at a time."

Sergeant Catcham entered, glanced round and snapped:

"Room—shun!"

He had a compelling voice and all leapt to attention, Gelda treading on a nail and smothering an oath.

"Right! Sit on your beds with your feet up. As you were! With your feet pointing towards the officer."

For the next five minutes Perky, no doubt fascinated by the

blisters, maintained an intelligent interest, poking with his stick at exceptional specimens.

He whispered something to Sergeant Catcham.

"Tell the officer if your feet is all right, and if not state what is wrong with them."

Apparently officers were too sacred to have direct intercourse with the men, for all their wishes were conveyed through the medium of an N.C.O.

"Blister, sir."

"Rather a horrid-looking thing, what, Sergeant? I think the answer to that is treatment."

Having made this profound utterance, Perky waited for the sergeant to snap "Medical bunk!" and then passed on to the next sufferer.

Whatever the answer, nearly all were dispatched to see the Medical Officer, or M. and D., as he was called, because if a guardsman tottered up on one leg and with a temperature of a hundred and four, he would be sure to scribble "Medicine and Duty" on the sick report.

Finally, the room was called to attention again and Perky retired to the mess, no doubt to fortify himself after this gory scene with a few whiskies and soda.

By seven o'clock the Piggery had more or less settled down for the night. It was rather early, but all were attracted by the luxury of iron beds and, if not already between the blankets, contemplated the thought with satisfaction.

"It ain't reveille and it ain't lights art I mind. It's the time in between."

Even Nobby had forsaken his girl friend at the "Star."

Those whose financial position allowed had been to the Naafi to replenish falling stocks of cigarettes, razor blades and soap. Many bargains were struck between some like Hoofer who had coupons, but were always penniless after the week-end, and others like Snags who had no coupons but seemed to have the ability to spend a shilling and still have elevenpence left. Hoofer got two cigarettes. But in any case Hoofer had only to ask any member of the Piggery and, after a little argument, he would get a cigarette.

"Smoking well?" he would enquire wistfully of Martin.

"I've only one left, Hoofer."

"That's all I'm asking for."

"Be Jasus!" said Dolly, feeling for a cigarette end in his pocket, where, like a squirrel, he had carefully secreted it for a rainy day. "On Sunday I smoke cigars and then on Wednesday it's dockers I'm looking for."

Gelda was the last in from the Naafi.

"Them Naafi scraggs!" he said disgustedly. "I was only waiting half an hour, like, for a wad and a cup of tea. Have you noticed how the rock buns have shrunk? And they say there's no profit. Christ! if there isn't, somebody's doing a bit of fiddling somewhere."

He gave the room a knowing nod.

It was a large oblong hut, equipped with radiators and electric light, and contained twenty-two ancient iron beds.

"Only enough to make a battle-ship, like," Gelda would remark.

In between spits and growls a radio blurted out the latest dance music on the Forces programme. The Piggery had become insensible to noise; perhaps the persistent roars of N.C.Os. had affected their ear-drums. It was noticeable, too, that all their conversations were carried on with an even greater gusto than those by American screen actors.

The radio rested on Dolly's locker, the result being that people were always pouncing on his bed and dirtying his blankets. Not that Dolly was fastidious, though naturally he objected to lumps of clay in the small of his back when he buried himself for the night.

Sometimes when no one was about, Martin would sneak up to the set and twiddle the knobs until he was rewarded with strains of Bach or Beethoven. But if anyone should come in while he was doing so, he would guiltily return the knob to its original position and move quickly away, ready to maintain that the wave-length must have changed itself.

Even a theatre orchestra was considered highbrow, whilst those who read *Picture Post* in the library were definitely intellectuals.

A discussion had suddenly arisen, as they usually did, in the swift manner of a tornado. Gelda began it:

"One thing about sleep," he said philosophically, placing his trousers on the palliasse and sprinkling them with water from a mug to make them crease as he slept: "you're about equal to the



civvies. You're both dead to the world. It's when you wake up in a morning you find a difference."

Dolly, who was writing his daily letter to the missus, paused:

"Did you see the papers? They say it's after being better off than the civvies we are."

"To read some of the rags to-day you'd think we were wallowing in the lap of luxury, masticating rubies and excreting gold," said the Bishop, making his bed down.

Snags had all his kit, belt, pouches, small pack, and even his large pack arranged upon a spare blackout board on the bed, and was serenely blancing. Now and then he held himself away from it like an artist contemplating his craftsmanship. Finishing this, he took the chin-strap off his service dress cap and gave himself up to the ecstasy of polishing.

"We're as well off as civvies, anyway," he remarked absently.

Nobby, who had borrowed a cigarette and was now making his way to Gelda in search of a light, was outraged by this. He stopped and adopted a threatening attitude.

"Who is? We ain't all millionaires like you with private incomes." Snags had his pay made up by his firm. "We don't all go tee-heeing Naafi tarts, getting buckshee tea and wads. We honest soldiers pays our way."

Gelda's nose shone at the thought.

"We're only loaded up, like, with fifteen bob a week."

"Same as that," from somebody in the far corner.

Fully dressed, Hooper yawned and turned on his side. The rule was that no bed should be made down before mid-day, but Hooper took full advantage of his after that hour. Whenever he entered the barrack-room he would fling himself upon his bed to snatch a few minutes' rest.

"Not bad, isn't that," he murmured speculatively, remembering former days of signing on at labour exchanges. "If it wasna for all this cleaning we do and t'price of ciggies and beer——"

"Lot of cleaning you do, you horrible-looking detail," said Snags in derision.

"I always git theer, anyway," retorted Hooper. "We're not all like you, putting our hair in curling pins. Lord, if you was on swabs to-morrow you'd be over at the mess polishing the tables now."

Gelda crawled into bed, stretched luxuriously, and then sat up to light a cigarette.

"And who wants to stay in this bleeding place?" he demanded. "You've got to go out some time or you'd only be going screwy, like. And it costs a bob to the nearest town and back—unless you're like Nobby there, mucking in deadily with all the bus conductresses."

Martin was reading a thriller by Edgar Wallace. His mind had so deteriorated in two years that he found it impossible to concentrate on anything of a more serious nature. Really he ought to have been writing to Janet, but he had done this so often and had repeated the same thoughts so many times that it did not seem worth the effort. One sentence, such as "I'm browned off," or "I'm afraid I've run into a bad spot, so would you send a postal order?" etc., covered all that was important, and then he would have to rack his brains for half an hour to think of something else to fill the page. One of these days he meant to tap Dolly for inspiration, who reeled off four pages nearly every night.

"They ought to make all travelling free for the troops," he said.

Usually he avoided becoming involved in Piggery controversies because his voice was not of the same quality as that of Dolly or Nobby, and seemed small and strange. It reminded him of a dove cooing amid the roars of the jungle. Also logic played only a small part; an argument was won or lost by the capacity of one's lungs.

"That's right. We ought to travel for nothing," said Gelda, who always took up what Martin said and publicised it for him.

Dolly began to search in his kit-bag. This apparently touched a chord in Gelda's mind, for he too began to rummage in his, though their methods differed considerably. Dolly obviously had system. All his clothes were neatly folded, while such things as shaving kit, cleaning materials, cotton and needles, and other necessary articles were kept tidily in appropriate tins. On the other hand, Gelda groped blindly inside for a moment, then, losing patience, leapt out of bed and emptied the whole of the contents on to the floor. It appeared that he was after a clean vest which was tied up in a knot at the bottom and in need of repair. To return his treasures to the kit-bag, he found it necessary to use some persuasion—his foot—to ram them all back again. Dolly was much more methodical, and soon found what had once

been a little tin of Colman's mustard now containing stamps.

"Yes, be Jasus, there's not many that doesn't smoke ten ciggies a day, and you only get thirty at reduced prices, so it's six shillings a week you have to be finding for that."

"And what abart barrack damages?"

"And suppers?"

"Three bleeding meals a day!" fumed Gelda, who was always hungry. "I'd like to see the civvies doing route marches like we done and P.T. and things on three meals a day. It'd shake 'em."

"Wouldn't half—with the tack we get served up."

"Lord, if it's wuss in Civvy Street the poor devils must be starving."

"By the time you've walked back from the cook-arse you've worked up another appetite."

"Only costs you seven bob a week for suppers, like."

"It's worth a quid a week to be at home."

"You want to see the scoff they get in the officers' mess. The civvies must be after thinking we're all officers."

Meanwhile the Bishop had taken up pencil and paper and was attempting to compose a letter. He seemed to be having some difficulty with spelling, and Martin, who slept in the next bed, observed with interest—considering the Bishop's flowery method of speech—that the word "communication" was written uncertainly like a piece of twisted wire, while "soap" was spelt "sope" and "written" had only one "t."

By tacit consent the argument ceased as suddenly as it had arisen, and one by one the Pigs began to settle down for the night, each with his own profound and private thoughts.

Directly he closed his eyes Martin began to think of his wife. It upset him, this feeling of loneliness, of desire, which so often assailed him at night. These were the times when he needed her—indeed, any woman—most, and felt how unnatural and cruel was this life of segregation, for the young generally, but most of all perhaps for the married.

Once or twice he had gone up to London, or the Smoke, as it was called, for a week-end, sometimes on his own, sometimes with members of the Piggery. But it brought him little consolation, for he found no satisfaction in picking up a W.A.A.F. or an A.T.S. or even one of the many civilian girls who flocked to Hyde Park

Corner on Saturday night. What was to be gained in squandering time and money in petty flirtations and vile beer? He had been used to better things, and on the whole it upset him to mingle with the crowds and see the delighted looks of lovers. It made him feel that the most precious years of his life were being wasted.

Yes, he needed Janet badly. She must come down for a while and he would apply for a sleeping-out pass; and then the thought came to him—a secret thought that he had sometimes had before—that it would gratify something in him to show her off slyly to the Piggery, to know they were looking at her with covetous eyes but could never have her. Out of the feeling of frustration and inferiority which his environment induced, he wanted to prove to his fellow sufferers that he did have at least one thing everybody hadn't—a beautiful wife. He needed her in order to restore his sense of importance.

Idly he wondered what she would think if he had two stripes on his arm—not that he would accept them. Still, the thought was amusing.

Soon the chatter turned to heavy breathing, and then snores. All were asleep.

## CHAPTER IV

IT was during breakfast next morning that Martin was told.

The daily detail, a sheet of duties made out each day by the sergeant-in-waiting and posted up every evening in the Spider, showed him to be a swab. That, of course, meant being at the mess-room, together with five other guardsmen, ten minutes before the remainder of the company. And so the usual rush between reveille and swab-call was intensified: one had to wash, shave, brush the bed space out, fold blankets in the authorised manner, arrange kit according to battalion regulations, and perform numerous irksome tasks such as rubbing up the buttons of a greatcoat.

"Join the Army and see the world," Nobby would say; then add, with a snort: "Join the Guards and scrub the bugger."

Upon reaching the mess, or battalion dining-hall, the first thing was to get plates from the cook-house—it was built on to the mess—and convey twelve to each table. This did not require skill so much as endurance and determination, for the plates were

kept in hot ovens and consequently provoked one to drop them and run. But plates meant money, and money meant cigarettes, so one only ran.

Each company was allotted its own tables, two complete rows of them, stretching from one end of the mess-room to the other, and by the time the swabs had seen to the plates the tables were being occupied by a steady and increasing trickle of guardsmen. The Piggery usually got there first.

The next task was to carry buckets of tea to the tables and fill each man's mug; after that to bring in dixies of potatoes and bacon, or whatever it was, which a corporal on each table was supposed to distribute. In practice the corporal, who always avoided unnecessary labour, detailed a man to deputise for him while he looked on.

A corporal-in-waiting from each company saw that all tables were filled so that eleven men could not camouflage themselves as twelve and get an extra ration between them—guardsmen were up to all the tricks and needed careful watching.

"One more man over there," the vigilant corporal of Number Three Company was shouting. "Another over there."

"You've got a hard neck!"

Nobby's accusing voice rose out of the roar of chatter. Martin, who had almost completed his duties, paused to regain his wind.

"Abart time some of you fly guys fluffed to yourselves."

"Yeah?" came Gelda's reply. "And who d'you think you're talking to, like? I'm not a B7 man. You're talking to an A1 man now. Better look at my pay-book if you don't believe it."

Neither was Nobby B7, but Gelda had his own logic.

"And what d'you want me to do—turn grey? D'you think I'm going to take a piece of bread a sparrow wouldn't look at? I'm no bleeding bird."

"Oh, yes, you are," said Gelda obstinately. "A wulloo-wulloo bird. Flies round in dizzy circles and finally disappears up its own —"

"Never took you to fly rarnd in dizzy circles, did it? You don't even know where you are yet, whether you're coming or going."

"Will you shut up, both of you, or be Jasus I'll be after lapping the table round your neck."

The storm was only of the teacup variety, and after putting the

entire table through a swift "third degree," the corporal-in-waiting approached the mess-man and soon returned with another ration of bread.

"Oh, Roule!"

Corporal Abernethy looked hard at Martin.

"Yes, Corporal. I'd just finished——"

"Yeah, I know. I forgot to tell you; the Jerk wants to see you after P.T."

The Jerk! Martin trembled. What could one so exalted as the company sergeant-major want with him? Throughout breakfast and P.T. his mind ran over and over his immediate past activities, accounting for each moment, examining each action from every angle to see if it could be considered an offence within the meaning of the Act; for there were so many Acts with so many different meanings that even if one had a trained legal mind one could never be sure that one's name was free from dishonour. But he could think of nothing. Unless—could it possibly be that matter that Sergeant Catcham had hinted at?

The platoon marched down to the gymnasium, or "Jimmy-nasum" as Sergeant Catcham called it, under the care of Corporal Abernethy. Muscles, the N.C.O. entrusted with the battalion's physical development, awaited them with obvious satisfaction, a foreboding gleam in his eyes.

"God, I feel tired when I look at Muscles," sighed the Bishop with a shudder. Timidly Martin regarded the bulging biceps of the bronzed battalion Hercules and was affected like the Bishop; his knees sagged.

"Class! Atten—tion!" commanded Muscles in a curious, high-pitched voice. Any other N.C.O. would have growled: "Party—shun!"

They were marched off briskly in the direction of the weapon-training field. No worse fate could have been theirs, for Muscles often detailed a corporal to exercise them, and a corporal was easy meat. But you could not "skive" with Muscles. He exerted a magnetic influence upon all, and they seemed painfully anxious to do as he told them, even better than he expected.

"Bobbing like a shower of unsquadded men," muttered Nobby disdainfully; "so's he won't chase 'em."

At the weapon-training field they stripped to the waist and

began running round Muscles in a circle as if he were a maypole.

"Come on, neew! Come on! You're all asleep. Short steps. On the toes. You've got to keep awake while you're here. The Germans are awake. They keep on showing us how much awake they are. They've got stamina, guts!"

The way he said "stamina" it sounded a most frightening thing. Martin had a picture of wide-awake Nazis full of stamina, committing all sorts of atrocities.

"I only wish they'd come here with some of that stamina of theirs and do this ruddy P.T.," muttered Gelda, very hot.

"Come no, neew. Keep going! Right, facing me in four teams. Running on the spot—begin! Knees up! Higher yet! Higher! Leg-strengthening exercises. That's what you all want. Leg-strengthening exercises."

Inspired by all the good he was doing them, smiling with profound satisfaction at all the leg exercises he was giving and would continue to give them, he went into a sort of dream.

"Right—change!" he cried suddenly. "After me—forwards, sideways, and upwards. Come on, neew! Pick it up! Pick it up! You've got to keep awake, you know."

Dolly got his arms folded somewhere round his back, and Gelda's became entangled with his neck, while Hooper looked like a windmill in a gale; and Muscles' eyes gleamed at them all the time. He had remarkable eyes, and each man thought they were gleaming specially at him.

"The things I've done for England," panted Martin.

"Roll on death," muttered a voice behind.

After about twenty minutes of these exhausting antics, the platoon was doubled to another part of the field into a small wood, where they arrived gasping.

"Hands on the lower hips for deep breathing!" commanded Muscles.

"Just about my line, this," said Dolly, glad of the respite. "It's more of this I would be doing—the only exercise I'm good at."

"Breathing—that's what you want, breathing. Come on, neew! Out at the stomach. That's where you want it. Develop the waist muscles."

As he stood there talking, he oozed vitality, absorbing it from everything around him. Even the trees drooped.

"The Finns and the Japs make a lot of breathing, make a religion of it," he went on expansively.

Hope settled upon the faces of the platoon; Muscles, who fancied himself as an orator, was given every encouragement to launch upon a dissertation on deep breathing, as every minute spent in listening to his wisdom meant one more towards ninety-three, when the period ended.

"As a race we pay too little attention to it."

"Yes, sir?" said Gelda, encouraging.

"What you want to do is to become aware—conscious, that's it—conscious of breathing."

"Yes, sir," from Hooper, burned up with interest.

"As you're walking up and down the barracks, for instance. The only time we, as a nation, are aware of breathing is when we're short of breath—as you are now. When you haven't any, that's the only time you want it. You all want to practise it. Don't walk around thinking of skirts. Breathe in four steps, then four steps breathe out. You all want to be fit. Get breathing-conscious."

Martin wondered how anyone so pulsating with the vigour of life could even be aware that such weak, delicate creatures as women existed; and he suddenly saw the battalion walking round absorbed, doing complicated mathematical calculations, breathing four out and four in.

"Yes, you're perspiring now," went on Muscles in triumph, pointing at Gelda. "Yes—that's what you want; opens the pores. It's just like a motor car," he went on, condescending to their puerile imaginations with a simile they could understand. "Your heads get hot, just like the radiator on a car. Your heads are cooling systems."

He was proud of his anatomical knowledge and went on with some obscure reasoning about circulation, by way of autovacs and magnetos.

"Be Jasus, I feel like an armoured fighting vehicle," grunted Dolly.

"Right," said Muscles at length. "Over here, now."

He led them to some fantastic structures from which trained acrobats, having taken one look, would have fled in horror. They were mostly the invention of his own brain and were



so constructed that Heath Robinson would have had enough copy for the rest of his life. Either it was simply genius or he had sat up at night in the Gym. office brooding for hours upon the nature and habits of his anthropoid ancestors. The place was a wilderness of ropes hanging from every bough.

"Christ," said Nobby.

"All easy, simple," said Muscles shooting up a rope by way of demonstration, then swarming along another, a horizontal one, twenty feet above the ground, and finally down a third one. Half-way he paused to give an analysis of correct rope-climbing.

"Wish he'd do the Indian rope trick," said Hoofer darkly.

The Bishop blinked one eyelid in undisguised amazement.

"There's no doubt about him."

"There's no dart abart Darwin, either," muttered another voice. "The longer I live the more I see and the simpler everything becomes."

Muscles, smiling serenely among all his contraptions, as if to say, "I alone am responsible," shepherded them to what he considered to be his masterpiece, the classic of his satanic devices. Roughly speaking, it consisted of a rope suspended from a high branch, and standing at either side a platform some fifteen feet high. The idea was to swing from one platform to the other by means of the rope without breaking one's neck.

"Simple for fellows like you," cried Muscles, his eyes gleaming with suppressed excitement. He proceeded to leap up the platform in two bounds and then sailed through the air like the man on the flying trapeze. The platoon felt the swish of wind and looked nervously at each other. "Ordinary line mobs do this with full kit on. Come on, neeow, Gelda."

With the look of a man on his way to the scaffold, Gelda mounted the platform. Then, but for the barking of a dog somewhere in the woods, there was silence.

"Come on, Gelda! Grab hold of the rope! Let's see you, neeow!"

Thus encouraged, Gelda grasped the rope with considerable tenacity, and suddenly fell into the abyss. His feet touched the far platform, but the momentum was not sufficient for him to gain his balance there and he reeled backwards. A look of panic was on his face as he swung loosely between the two

worlds, the platform he had left and the other he had missed.

"Let yourself slide down the rope," urged Muscles. "Let yourself go."

Perhaps the swiftness of events had momentarily seized up Gelda's brain, for he began kicking wildly. Then it seemed to come to him that the earth was beneath and by sliding down the rope he could make contact with it. This he did, to his intense satisfaction.

"He won't get me there again in a hurry," he muttered, mingling with the Piggery. "Sod that for a game."

Snags, who had been manoeuvred into second place by his scheming comrades, mounted the platform with even less alacrity than Gelda.

"Come on, Snags. Get up it. I'm not asking you to jump from Blackpool Tower. It's too easy."

It appeared that Snags did not believe him, for having gained the summit of one platform he remained there staring blankly at the other. It would be Martin's turn next. He fervently hoped Snags would still be there at half-past nine.

"It's up to you, Snags," said Muscles, becoming emotional. "You're letting the side down. You can do what Gelda can, I know. Look at Gelda laughing at you."

It was an old trick, divide and conquer. Gelda grinned foolishly. But Snags had temporarily lost his ambitiousness and did not care how many sides he let down so long as he did not let himself down on that rope.

"Come on! Jump for it!"

Something came over Snags which left him speechless, frozen to the platform, with a lifeless look on his face. And he might still have been there had not Fate intervened.

A streak of black shot from the wood straight at Muscles. It was Smoky Joe, usually a quite affable little mongrel who roamed about the camp at will eating out of the hand of any guardsman. Indeed, he was a democratic dog and, whilst all guardsmen were his friends, tolerated N.C.Os. and officers with only reasonable contempt. But Muscles he detested; Muscles brought something else out in him, and the feud between them had become notorious and deadly.

P.T. therefore ended somewhat abruptly with Muscles

dodging through the woods pursued by his relentless enemy.

"I was going to jump," said Snags, when he had descended and speech returned. "But when I was taking off I could hear my legs scream, 'Don't,' so I didn't."

## CHAPTER V

MARTIN hurried back to the company lines glad to have escaped so lightly. But army life was a succession of ordeals, and now another impended: the Jerk wanted him!

It was not long before he saw that formidable person standing on the verandah of the company office, shouting the names of guardsmen who had been "booked" the previous day for such outrageous behaviour as standing idle on parade, or for having a bit of fluff under the bed at room inspection. All were for Company Orders.

After watching the Jerk for a few minutes, his heart accelerating until it shook his whole body, Martin ventured across the road to where he was standing. Abruptly the C.S.M. turned on his heel and went inside the office—perhaps to arrange the offenders' punishment with the Company Commander, who acted as the defence, the prosecution and the Bench. But he came out again rather quickly, and Martin banged his left heel on the verandah beside his other and stood stiffly to attention, awaiting his pleasure.

In the Guards one did not sidle up to a superior and say, "Excuse me," or "Pardon me, sir." The correct method of approach was to stamp hard and then wait hopefully. If this was unsuccessful, one stamped again.

"Oh, Roule." The Jerk's voice sounded almost natural.

"Sir."

"You'd like to be made up to a corporal, I understand. Be at C.O.'s Orders at eleven-thirty. Got that?"

The Jerk looked away as though to continue with the next business; he had the manner of one who bears great responsibility with fortitude.

By way of dismissing himself, Martin turned to the right, counted a pause of two, three, and banged his heel down.

"Wait! Wait! Wait!" The Jerk's reproving voice went progressively higher, and Martin waited apprehensively. "Don't

forget—have a good turnout, a correct set-up on the cap. Got that?"

"Sir."

"Company Orders cancelled till four o'clock, sir," said a voice from behind.

"What's that?" The Jerk turned.

This time Martin dismissed himself successfully. It was not until he was out of sight of this super-tyrant that the nature of the interview came over him. The Jerk had the power of stupefying his mind, so that all he could think of was how and when to turn to the right, or whether any daylight showed between his arms as he stood to attention. Now, as it dawned upon him that he was going to be made into a corporal, he succumbed to momentary panic. He couldn't go through with it; he wasn't the stuff which corporals were made of. Could he possibly get out of it? He had a sudden impulse to return; but no, there was no turning back now. He could imagine what would happen if he were to hurry back to the Jerk and say he never had wanted to be a corporal and didn't want to be one. The Jerk's reaction would be too ghastly to contemplate.

Feeling that the whole course of his life had been suddenly changed, he hurried across to the lecture hut, which was the place scheduled for the next parade.

A new world was opening up before him, a world full of responsibility. It was not unlike the good boy at school being chosen for a monitor. He recalled an incident which had stuck with him from early childhood. He had been in the infants' class at the time, and the teacher, irritated by their restlessness and chatter, had finally bribed them with the back of a chocolate box showing a picture of an old man with medals sitting with a little girl. To qualify for this prize, it had been necessary to sit still with folded arms, and for the first and only time in his life Martin had sat still all afternoon. Yes, he had set his mind on "Daddy's Medals"—but "Daddy's Stripes," so to speak, were by no means so alluring. What would Nobby and Dolly say? Would they not think he had done them a low-down trick, "worked a flanker on them"? Snags was different; they expected such things from Snags, who was just the right type for an N.C.O. Why hadn't they picked on him? The thought of it all filled Martin

with anxiety and consternation. It would be full of embarrassing moments, especially the first two or three weeks. Still, if he had to go through with it, he would not be the same as other N.C.Os., of course. He would not chivvy and persecute the men. There was no reason why one should not have authority without turning into a scab and a bully, and certainly he could never be that. He would be a pioneer, a new type, someone the fellows would obey and respect at the same time.

Entering the lecture-room, he brought his heels together smartly and awaited Sergeant Catcham's enquiring look.

"May I have leave to fall in, sergeant, please, from seeing the C.S.M.?"

"Fall in," returned the sergeant.

He bestowed upon Martin a knowing, almost intimate, look. This disturbed Martin even more; the mere thought of being familiar with Sergeant Catcham revolted him; he would much sooner remain on the opposite side.

A lecture was about to begin. Looking very learned, with the complicated parts of a Stuke gun littering the table, Sergeant Catcham launched off:

"Right! Pay attention. What we are going on with now is an introduction to a new gun—a new gun to you—the Stuke gun. Right! first of all we'll run over the general characteristics. Pay attention!"

His voice implied that he was not asking them to benefit by his knowledge, but daring them not to.

It occurred to Martin now that he had been half blind during the whole of his army career. He had regarded life entirely one-sidedly. Previously, in Civvy Street, he had walked down a certain road every day noticing only half of the buildings. Then one morning he had suddenly noticed the other half. He was noticing that other half now. Indeed, he would soon be in the other half himself. Perhaps even this afternoon he would have to stand in front of Gelda and Hooper and the Bishop and deliver a lecture. Such a demoralizing thought had never occurred to him before, but he saw now that he must be prepared for such an eventuality, must observe and study the technique of those who had been delivering lectures for years.

"Right! It weighs forty-seven pounds two and three-quarter

ounces. It has a flat trajectory which means, as far as you are concerned, it goes flat." What it meant as far as he was concerned he was not divulging; perhaps it was too involved. "Right! It is impossible to assemble incorrectly. The muzzle velocity is two thousand four hundred and ten feet per second. Are you all happy about that?"

Martin certainly was not. Sergeants usually acquired a wealth of learning on any subject they undertook, not despising the last inch or ounce; and having rattled off a multitude of intricate and minute details, expected the thickest skull to have them all automatically registered. Martin knew, if he pondered over it for hours, that he would never remember the muzzle velocity.

But even Sergeant Catcham did not seem at his best describing this new gun. In fact, he appeared to be distinctly ill at ease, and exhibited distracting mannerisms. For one thing, his hands annoyed him, and as all their training forbade them seeking refuge in his pockets, they pulled relentlessly at his moustache. Then again, he had a trick of grinding his teeth, and whilst Martin awaited the next tug at the moustache, Gelda was obviously intrigued by the grinding teeth.

"Right!" said the sergeant, and there was a subtle satisfaction in his voice. He seemed to be particularly convinced by this word, and it featured prominently in his unusual style of address.

"What we are going on with now is recapitulation."

If not always sure of the exact meaning of long words, he knew the results they produced. He saw Nobby stiffen and Hooper frown. Indeed, all the faces, he noticed, as he glanced round, were either attempting expressions of intelligent interest, avoiding his eye, or trying to hide behind a convenient back.

Sergeant Catcham called this "bluffing the way."

Snags was perhaps the only one of this assembly gifted with anything approaching the kind of mind required; he could remember the most complicated names of parts and the most elusive measures of weight and distance.

Martin could soon get hold of principles, such as the theory of a combustion engine or the doctrines of Marx or Einstein; but dates and figures and technical names bewildered him.

Hooper, on the other hand, was always frankly bored by anything not in the nature of an anecdote about the adventures of an

Englishman, an Irishman and a Jew, or a lyric concerning a young lady from Gloucester or some other provincial city, and was affected by a distressing urge for sleep.

The Bishop was something of an enigma; at times he could repeat word for word whatever he was told with the precision of a technical expert, and at other times he would maintain a haughty silence.

"Right! What is the weight of the gun—er——" Purposely the sergeant hesitated, increasing the suspense with his roving eyes in order to get them all "bobbing." Then he shouted:

"Clarke!"

Instead of making notes in his exercise book, Nobby had been drawing the outline of a nude and voluptuous female. He was badly shaken. Closing the book quickly, he stalled with: "Did you say me, Sergeant?"

Gelda looked relieved.

"Yes, you. You'll be telling me next I'm cross-eyed or I don't speak English."

"No—yes, Sergeant."

"Come on, then. I'm waiting. I've just told you. Fluff to yourself."

Nobby glanced across at Dolly, but from the agitated expression he saw there knew he would have to look elsewhere for assistance. He lapsed into thought, his brow wrinkling with the effort.

"You said—er—Sergeant?"

"Not a word about it."

"Weight of the gun," whispered Gelda behind him. It was only a straw, but then Nobby was only a drowning man. "Tell him two thousand and ten feet a second."

"Two thousand and ten feet a second," said Nobby brightly, as if suddenly inspired. Then as soon as it was out he realised Gelda's treachery.

Gelda sniggered and Sergeant Catcham ground his teeth.

"Be Jasus, you're a dozy man, Clarke," he thundered. "What are you?"

Nobby looked pained.

"What are you, then?"

"A dozy man," answered Nobby meekly.

Gelda sniggered again.

"Weight of the gun—er——"

The sergeant's threatening eyes settled for a moment on Hooper. But few N.C.Os. went out of their way to disturb Hooper, as he had twice been in the guardroom for assaulting sergeants.

"Weight of the gun," he reiterated. "Anybody!"

All mouths opened simultaneously, but because everybody except Snags was marking time on his answer, the rest were a split second late, the result being not unlike a concerto with Snags as soloist.

"Right! What we are going on with now is assembling the gun and naming the parts," went on the instructor, indicating the heap of ruins on the table.

Glad at last to have found an occupation, his hands went to work like a Walt Disney cartoon. Three deft movements and most of this mass of complicated metal had fallen into place; the gun was more than half-assembled. Simultaneously he rattled off about twenty different names with amazing speed.

"Upper and lower sleeve arm, elongated slot, actuating stud, extractor projection . . . fixed projection for ejection . . ."

The reactions of the onlookers varied. Dolly seemed mesmerised, Martin wrung his hands in an agony of futile concentration, while the Bishop's lips were working hard as if trying to outbid those of the sergeant. Snags, however, clearly absorbed it all like the Children of Israel devouring manna.

"Here," confessed the sergeant, indicating a diminutive stud, "we have a part without a name. It isn't in the book and nobody seems to know what to call it."

He sounded almost apologetic, as though he were placing himself between the fury of the squad and some criminally negligent official. His eyes looked at them, through them, on, on, into a melancholy future; the British Empire was crashing around him.

"So we'll just have to call it—a stud," he said with an air of resignation.

A few more flicks of the wrist and the jig-saw was complete. An evil-looking Stuke stood pointing away from them.

"Right! Gelda! You strip the gun and name the parts. There might be one or two you don't properly remember," he added encouragingly.

Gelda began to wrestle with the gun, drips of perspiration



falling upon it. Swinging it around suddenly so that the barrel pointed at Dolly, he accidentally pulled the trigger. He jumped.

"What the devil are you trying to do then—massacre the platoon?"

Of course the breech was empty and had probably never had a round inserted in it; but it was traditional for N.C.Os. to be consumed with wrath if an empty barrel should point accidentally at a guardsman. Such solicitousness was incomprehensible in view of the fact that all N.C.Os. did their best to kill all guardsmen on the square, or maim them for life at P.T.

"It was my hand slipped, like," murmured Gelda who seemed to have been struck with a new idea. "My hands is sweating, Sergeant."

Again he grasped the gun and a second time his hot hand slipped.

"Jasus, man! I'll be chewing the hair off you," cried Sergeant Catcham, frantic. "What d'you think youse are, then—a bleeding Fifth Columnist?" When excited, he often lapsed into his original Irish accent. "For Jasus' sake sit down!"

The crafty Gelda obeyed.

"Next one out—youse!" indicating the Bishop. "Let's see what you can do. Sure, it's easy. If I was to show it my youngster, he'd have it in pieces in ten seconds, and he isn't four yet. Come on, let's see if there's any more Nazis here."

However, though the Bishop did not go to the length of shooting up the squad, he fared little better than Gelda.

He turned to his instructor.

"It appears," he said in his careful, slow accents, "to elude me, Sergeant. Perhaps you would enlighten me further upon the—er—mystery of this device."

Sergeant Catcham may well have had a suspicion he was being "blackguarded," as it was called; but since this was the Bishop's customary mode of speech, it was always doubtful whether one was having one's leg pulled or not.

"I don't properly know," said the sergeant, "how some of you managed on your honeymoon, without a sergeant there to keep on telling you what to do."

"I bet you he was after taking his missus to pieces," whispered Dolly, meaning the sergeant, "and naming the parts."

"Queer hawk, the Bish!" muttered Nobby. "He's only gammin' on dumb."

"I must admit," the Bishop was saying to Sergeant Catcham, "I haven't had the pleasure of a—er—honeymoon."

"Then how in the name of St. Patrick did you manage to earn your living if you can't even do what you're shown? I don't know how some of you blokes managed to live so long."

"He must think," whispered Nobby, "we was all just apart in rags and tatters same as him, marching up for the dole, only we didn't choose this ruddy circus."

"Same as that," said a voice at the back.

Martin regarded the Bishop with a new curiosity. Indeed, he saw all his comrades in another light and felt weak at the thought of having to control them.

"Ah, well," he heard Hoofer say, "we'll git theer. And without your man bumming the load."

"He's only got a hard neck, like," murmured Gelda. "Never took him to earn four green-backs a week."

The sergeant was looking at the Bishop with considerable contempt, inviting him to explain his continued existence.

"Well," said the Bishop, modestly, "I usually managed to knock off between ten and fifteen pounds a week."

"Sure you did," said the sergeant, humouring him. "You'll be telling me next you was at Hollywood and your civvy moniker was Erroll Flynn—like mine was Shirley Temple."

The worst of Sergeant Catcham's humour was that it was liable to turn into regimental wrath if one entered into the same spirit.

"No, I was never at Hollywood," replied the Bishop, seriously. "Though quite a few film celebrities have eaten out of my hand, if I may say so, Sergeant."

The Piggery exchanged significant glances. In the course of a chequered career, the Bishop appeared to have missed only a few trifling occupations, such as Lord Mayor of London and Minister for War.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Go on! I'd like a few tips," said Sergeant Catcham.

"Yes," said the Bishop, unconcerned. "The head waiter made over thirty pounds a week. More than that, too. I'm afraid he was not over-scrupulous. Instead of keeping only a quarter of the

percentage allowed for tips on the bills—of resident guests—he—er—appropriated three-quarters. Still we others did not starve or—thirst.”

“Where was that, then? A Salvation Army hostel?—or that Y.M.C.A. in Scotland Road?”

“Well, no,” answered the Bishop gravely. “I did six months at the Dorchester, twelve at the Trocadero.”

“And d’you mean to say they paid you that much?” asked the sergeant, interested in spite of himself.

“Not altogether. We took most of it in tips. The Lounge day was most lucrative—you see you took it in turns to do different duties. On a Lounge day,” went on the Bishop, blinking one eye rapidly at the thought of it, “we could make seven pounds easily—in tips. I add, on a Lounge day.”

“And how else did you make it?” said the sergeant, succumbing to curiosity.

“There were other ways. Sometimes a middle-class person would venture in and ask me to recommend a wine. You had to size up your man, of course. Some of them couldn’t tell sherry from port. So I usually recommended an expensive wine off the list and then brought back a rather, er, cheaper one of the same colour.”

Sergeant Catcham looked with new eyes at the Bishop, pondering upon the fortunes of war which threw such phenomena into khaki. For all he knew, his platoon might be full of such celebrities.

“But that was only one way,” concluded the Bishop modestly.

“Tell us, then,” urged the sergeant rather wistfully, “the other way.”

“Well, a customer gives you ten shillings to take to the pay desk. You put the check on the silvo—placing half-a-crown under a serviette and the remainder above. Should the customer query the change—which they never do when women are with them; they just shove it in their pocket—you say politely: Oh, it must have slipped under the serviette, sir.”

The lesson on gunnery had, in fact, become of absorbing interest to everyone concerned, when the door opened and Perky entered.

## CHAPTER VI

"RIGHT!" said Sergeant Catcham sharply, quickly readjusting himself. He always kept one eye on the door, and was therefore prepared for any eventuality. "That's not too bad. Don't forget the projection for ejection and—— Room—shun!"

The platoon sprang to attention, while Sergeant Catcham paid that respect due to all commissioned ranks, his vigorous salute being returned by a languid movement of the hand.

"Carry on, please, Sergeant," returned Perky after an effective pause.

"Right!" continued Sergeant Catcham, carrying on. "Sit down quickly, and pay attention. Come on! Settle down again. Some of you seem to have missed a name here and there, so I'll run over the parts again for you. Watch me!"

This was another instance of bluffing the way, and N.C.O.s were such masters of the art that every lieutenant, who took little part in training, was convinced he had the most intelligent platoon in the battalion. Sergeant Catcham's method was to ask only his brightest men—Snags, for instance—questions of which he felt confident they already knew the answers, or, if he had any doubt, to prime them by telling them himself the very thing he wanted to know. Nobody thought anything of such deception, for everyone had come to regard the art of bluffing as an essential part of life in the Guards.

While Perky looked on with simulated interest, attempting to display that keen spirit which is associated, by the Press, with junior military leaders, Sergeant Catcham proceeded to race through the long and complicated list of parts.

When he came to the nameless stud a shadow darkened Perky's face. He and the sergeant then entered into a protracted and involved discussion, from which Perky ruefully emerged with: "I think the answer to that is, as you say, simply to call it a stud."

Martin had often wondered what was the exact role of officers, what part they played besides looking languid and giving out drills at Company Orders. In theory, a lieutenant was supposed to command a platoon, whilst a captain was in charge of a company, and a lieutenant-colonel bore the weight of a whole battalion

upon his shoulders. But they seemed to have little direct contact with or knowledge of their men, and lieutenants were more like super-foremen than anything else, dropping in at unexpected and infrequent moments, in the hope, perhaps, of surprising a lenient sergeant allowing the platoon to smoke.

It was left to a sergeant to instruct the men upon the weapons of war and, most important of all, to drill them and generally intimidate them; officers paid out money, and decided if a speck of dust disfigured a rifle barrel or a button was without lustre. In short, besides walking at the head of the platoon, or whatever formation they lead on route marches, delivering an occasional lecture about tactics and strategy—during exercises guardsmen were eloquent on the abilities of officers in this respect—their chief functions seemed to be those of inspecting and being saluted. Especially the latter; the barracks were swarming with shoulders embellished with “pips”; and by the time a guardsman had walked a hundred yards his arm was ready to drop off.

Perky glanced at his watch and then at Sergeant Catcham, who in turn glanced at his own. Though the instructor contrived to give the impression that he was far too engrossed in his work to keep an eye on the time, nevertheless, he was just as eager as any guardsman to be away, drinking coffee in the mess.

“Room—shun!” he commanded, after a nod of confirmation from Perky. “On the command, ‘Dismiss,’ turn to your right and salute. Dis-miss!—asyouwerrrrr!”

The presence of an officer always required what was called “getting a barrage” off the men.

“Pull your foot in sharp! Count a pause of tup three—Dismiss! tup three-one! tup three-one! Right! Be on parade in half an hour’s time for clothing board. Off you go!”

Between ten o’clock and half-past eleven each company was allotted a half-hour break, and during this time the Naafi was besieged by guardsmen, impatient with hunger.

It was one of those rare occasions upon which the Piggery acted in complete agreement, every member dashing across to the Naafi as if he feared it might vanish before he arrived there.

The place was thronged, but some attempt was made at order by the formation of queues—vigilant queues ready to unite as one man to evict anyone who tried to slip unobtrusively towards the

counter. Waiting there, Martin looked timidly across at the corporals' mess; it was almost inconceivable that this very evening he would be queuing up there, instead of with the Piggery.

"I was only here ten minutes before him, like," Gelda was saying in reproof to Maude, a dark, soulful-looking Naafi girl. "Course I'm nobody. I only work here."

Nobby gave Maude an engaging smile, which she returned with a slight toss of the head; but Nobby, who had considerable experience of the misleading ways of women, was not at all deterred. He had already tried several times to make a date with her; indeed, he never lost an opportunity of trying to make a date with any girl, however casual their acquaintance.

"Tea and three wads, sweetheart, and a packet of Woods."

By no exercise of the imagination could she have been considered attractive, but because she was of a rare sex, seen only at infrequent intervals in this masculine world and then from afar, and possessed, moreover, the key to untold wealth in the form of cigarettes without coupons, she was highly desirable to every man there.

"No Woodbines wivout chits," she said firmly.

Nobby made a supreme effort and bestowed upon her his most fascinating smile.

"You know me. I'll bring one in to-morrow. Gar on. You can trust me."

"I wannit nar," said Maude.

However, ten Woodbines quietly changed hands, and feeling he had made a conquest, Nobby winked slyly at Gelda.

"Bet I make a date with her for to-night," he whispered as Maude went off with the tea-urn to refill it.

Whenever Martin came near a woman he was suddenly overwhelmed by shyness and loneliness. Somehow, he lacked Nobby's self-assurance, his knack of making dates, his easy gift of approach. Women confused him; yet they were just as necessary to him as to anyone else, and if in his wife's absence he sometimes wished for others it only made her seem the more important. All women reminded him of Janet and of their wasted years.

"You'll be missing your turn if you're not careful!" he said sarcastically, pushing aside a stray guardsman who was trying to muscle in out of place.

Even Hooper seemed similarly affected by Maude.

"I was thinking once," he said, when they were all settled round a table, "of gerrin' the wife down for a spell. But she'd go nuts in a dive like yon village."

"Same as that," from Gelda. "It takes me to suffer in silence, myself. The wife'd only get an awful barrage off me if I was to get her dumped in a place like this."

"I'd have my missus down here in double time, not half, and snatch it," cried Dolly. "But our Clarence is after getting over the whooping cough, so I'll have to mark time on it a bit longer. The army might be dead on for a single bloke that's missing parade in his upper storey—like your man Snags, there—but, be Jasus, it's bad news for a married bloke."

"Trouble with some blokes is they can't take it," retorted Snags, who was strangely unsusceptible to feminine charm.

Nobby glanced at the counter, in an attempt to engage Maude's eye. In this he succeeded and winked, Maude tossing her head in reply, though not quite as high as before.

"I was thinking myself of getting Janet—my wife—down for a time," said Martin. "I think I'll fix it up next time I write. I don't suppose any of you know of a good address."

"Proper order, too," agreed Dolly. "I'm all for you. Did you say address? If it's lodgings you're after looking for, it's gold you might as well go prospecting. And the price some of the civvies charge around here! Be Jasus, you'd think you was on ten pound a week income tax. Half the battalion is on sleeping-out leave, and you can't even get a barn under a quid a week."

"I know a certain person," began the Bishop, "who isn't particular about evacuating the barracks by night—as long as he occupies it with two stripes by day."

Snags blushed modestly, but he was not the only one who coloured. Martin felt low, despicable, and avoided his comrades' eyes lest his own should reveal his secret. It would be better to prepare them at once, he knew, but he shrank from doing so.

"Bad type, Snags," said Nobby. "You'll see him cutting us around till we don't know whether we're coming or going. He'll be marching us in company orders just about every day."

Martin wondered if they would think him a bad type too.

"He'll only be booking us left, right and centre, like."

"Takes you to keep the eye down," answered Snags, grinning, though his look suggested he found the thought of marching Nobby a tempting one.

"I wouldn't have the tapes at any price," grunted Nobby. "You should just see the state of some of these corporals, running around as if nobody owned them, like a shower of cripples. Falling to pieces they are. They seems to pick the biggest gobshites they can and make them up."

"Not all of them," protested Martin, and was then sorry he'd spoken. He wondered, however, whether it was true what Nobby had said and whether the Jerk regarded him thus.

Sugar in Naafi tea was a common occurrence compared with sweet remarks about corporals, and Dolly raised his eyebrows quizzically, while Nobby switched his gaze from Maude to Martin in surprise.

"Perhaps," said the Bishop politely; "I say, perhaps you could name one corporal in this battalion whose outlook transcends 'Wake up, man! Swing your arms up! If you don't get in quick time I'll chase you up the'—er, filthy word—'walls.'"

The Bishop gave a perfect imitation of Corporal Abernethy, which evoked strong applause.

Martin frowned. Put to it like this, he found it hard to call to mind a single shining exception, among the junior N.C.Os. he had come across. However, the matter was now too personal for him to admit defeat.

"There was once a corporal who wasn't——"

His name was being shouted by someone. It was a runner from the orderly room, with a sinister yellow envelope in his hand—a telegram. Martin stood up to attract attention.

"There you are," said the orderly, breathing hard. "Been looking all over. Thought you'd done a nip or something."

Though he managed to maintain his composure, Martin's heart felt as if it had suddenly touched a high-tension circuit.

He tore the envelope open and glanced at its contents.

"Everything O.K. at home?"

It was Gelda, speaking for the whole of the anxious Piggery. A queer hawk, Gelda. Since the depot days, when the squad had first been formed, Gelda had for some reason taken upon himself the role of Martin's protector, backing him up, shielding him from



the wrath of sergeants. It was as though he had sensed Martin's isolation in a group to which he did not properly belong, and felt sorry for him, and wished to help him.

"Everything's O.K.," Martin said with a laugh. "It's only from my wife. She's coming down here to-day. She'll be here this afternoon."

## CHAPTER VII

IF it was not unusual for the Pigs, somewhat breathless from the effort of keeping pace with Hooper, to be the first troops at the Naafi counter, it was also not unusual for them to be last back on parade. They "alus git their" as Hooper often remarked, but not in any hurry.

However, shortly after the receipt of Martin's telegram, having congratulated him on his good fortune and given advice about the best tonics for sleepless nights, they began to swallow their tea and wads with almost indecent haste. Hooper normally disposed of six cakes with as many bites and gulps—"Like feeding an elephant with dolly mixtures," Nobby said; while Gelda made a valiant spring for second place by ramming into his mouth a fifth cake before the last four had found their way to the chasm beyond; but even they now had their work cut out to compete with Snags and Nobby.

Dolly, who never showed enthusiasm for Naafi confectionery, left half a rock bun on his plate—to which Hooper beat Snags by a split second; and Martin was so excited by his message from Janet that he had temporarily lost his appetite.

Dolly glanced at the clock and gave utterance to the thought that was now dominant in most minds.

"Clothing board."

It was only a quarter-past ten.

"Takes us."

"Doesn't half."

Gelda looked at Nobby, and, in turn, Nobby at Dolly, each aware of the destruction maturing in the other's brain. In a body they rose and left the Naafi. At first they walked, Gelda and Nobby jockeying for leadership of the pack; faster and faster went their legs until Gelda broke into a trot, then Nobby into a canter.

In the end all except Hooper were racing towards the barrack-room—a rare occurrence, considering the direction they were taking.

Martin followed automatically in their wake.

"I'd have been after following you out of those gates sharp to-night," said Dolly almost resentfully to Martin. "Our Clarence would be getting down to meet me. Be Jasus, I'll gam on he's better and get them down this week."

"No sort of a life for a married la'," grieved Gelda. "Takes me to go looking for a place for the missus."

"Reminds me, that does." Nobby gasped from the effort of running. "Once when I marches up to the Pool on a job a bloke says to me: 'Go and get thi tea, la'.' So I says: 'Who's la' around here? That ain't my moniker.' Then another bloke marches up and says: 'Gimme a light, wakky.' Christ, you'd think you was in the bleeding jungle up in the Pool."

Gelda, who was touchy about anything reflecting upon the good name of Liverpool, snorted. One critical word, and he was ready to rise in the defence of every one of its teeming millions.

"When I go round the East End, like, I only have to hire a ruddy interpreter or else start making signs."

They all poured into the barrack room, and in two seconds what had been a model of regimental neatness became a heap of untidy kit, as if a hurricane had swept through. Nearly everyone began a frantic search of kit-bags, many, like Gelda, tipping the whole of the contents on to the floor, while Dolly, of course, only had to insert a cautious hand—in case of a stray needle—to extract what he wanted, a neat bundle tied up with string.

Hooper, last in, flung himself down on his bed and closed his eyes.

"I wonder," mused Gelda.

At arm's length he held a pair of trousers which he regarded with an air of indecision, his head cocked on one side, after the manner of a woman with a dress.

For a few seconds he continued to wonder, then reaching a decision, said: "I think I can fix 'em so as the Red Robber might let 'em pass. I must have a new pair for my next leave."

In civvy life he had always indulged in clothes as far as circumstances permitted, and now the army gratified his utmost extravagance; for here the only obstacle was the R.Q.M.S., or the Red Robber, as he was more popularly known, and all the payment

he required was a convincing hole. Gelda prided himself upon an ability to create convincing holes.

"Anybody got a match-box?"

Either nobody had, or those who had were using them, or they were all too engrossed in other acts of sabotage to hear.

After nosing in vain round the floor, he went to a waste-paper box in the passage and rooted one out.

Soon he was applying it briskly and successfully to the knees of his trousers.

"What about the war effort?" muttered Snags, patriotic.

"What war effort?" demanded Gelda, suspicious.

"The one what we're in."

"We're in?"

It seemed to be a new thought to Gelda that he was in a war effort.

"I *am* the ruddy effort," he replied, feeling his way.

"You might be somebody's effort, but you aren't a war effort; you're a wrecker, that's what you are."

"Then why don't they give us more grub and pay? You've gotta get your money's worth, gotta cover your bones with something, like."

"The trouble is," said Martin, slightly extending a hole in his sock, "we've no spirit of sacrifice, because the whole army system is riddled with pettiness and class distinction. We're treated like naughty children and all we want to do is to put something across them. The officers walk about like tailors' dummies, so we think we should."

"Same as that," agreed Gelda, renewing his efforts with the match-box.

By this time Hooper was breathing heavily, so Dolly shook his shoulder firmly.

"Eh! Eh! Warrawan?"

"Clothing board," said Dolly. "You haven't changed anything for the last three times."

"Nothing to change," grunted Hooper, turning over.

Although Hooper was the worst-dressed member of the Piggery, perhaps of the battalion, patriotic thriftiness was not the reason. If he went about with his elbows soiled from leaning on public bars, and with grease marks on his blouse testifying to occasional

bacon for breakfast, it was only because he was immune from the vanities of common men. The wonder was that he "rubbed" on battalion parade with no more than a warning to get his battle-dress scrubbed.

However, with the exception of Hooper and the Bishop, who confined himself to attaching a few strands of wool to rather worn socks as proof that they had been darned—a necessary qualification for exchange—the room gave itself up to the absorbing occupation of making holes.

"Anybody got an odd sock to make up a pair?" asked Dolly, suddenly.

"Somebody's been fiddling around here," accused Nobby, searching his kit. "Some fly guy has whipped a pair of short pants. Some of you would just abart stoop to snatching the dirt from under a bloke's finger nails."

A cry came from the corridor.

"Come on! Get outside! Get on parade! Hurry up!"

Hooper stirred automatically and listened, but, recognising the familiar voice of Corporal Abernethy, deemed it safe to relax again. For the saboteurs it was the signal for a rush to finish their respective jobs, the finer technique of match-boxes and nail-files being now abandoned for the swifter process of hacking with knives and razor blades.

"Come on! Come on! Come on!"

Hooper stirred again; only one voice he knew trebled each word of command.

"Get outside! Get outside! Get outside!"

Though far away down the passage, this voice was much more penetrating than the last, and it was getting nearer; a super-voice which smote the eardrums, pierced the brain, and galvanised the whole nervous system into instant oscillation. It inspired all with dread, making strong men tremble. To develop such a voice was the ambition of every N.C.O. in the battalion.

Martin was affected as he had once been when a stick of bombs had fallen, exploding one by one in his direction; he felt paralysed, petrified, waiting helplessly for the end.

The door-handle turned, every one tensed; and before the Jerk's florid face appeared, Hooper slipped off the bed, to begin fumbling with his kit-bag.

"Get outside! Get outside! Get outside! Am I talking to myself? Get outside!"

He obviously believed in the value of repetition. While the first "get outside" only made the beds rattle, the force of the last seemed to make them clear the floor.

The Jerk's face was purple and strained like a man in the grip of strong emotion; guardsmen always made him emotional. Martin wondered if that face could ever smile, for never once in the whole of his long and precarious association with the Jerk had he seen it relax for a moment. Yet surely there must be another Jerk, the one that had a wife and two children.

Everyone grabbed his bundle and dashed towards the door, even Hooper moving with discreet alacrity; no one trifled with the Jerk.

In a twinkling—such was the C.S.M.'s personality—the whole company was on parade, blocking the roadway, taking last draws at cigarette ends. It would have taken ten sergeants at least five minutes longer to bring about the same result.

"Get fell in!" he reiterated, looking at them as if they were his mortal enemies.

"Get fell in!" cried the sergeants, obediently taking up the cry.

"Get fell in!" echoed corporals, squeaky in comparison with the Jerk's magnificent roar.

"Company,—shun!"

No one dawdled when he was about; and the impact of a hundred feet upon the gravel was sharper than the explosion from a battery of field guns firing simultaneously.

"Move to the left in threes! Left—turn!"

It could not be said of the Jerk that he took his profession lightly. His head shook so much with the effort of each word that one would not have been surprised if his eyebrows had shaken off.

"By the right!—quick—march! Left, right, left, right, left, right. . . ."

To call out the time for marching men may seem a trifling matter, needing no special skill. Yet any guardsman would agree that it was a trifle denied quite a number of sergeants, who had no sense whatever of time and rhythm. To give the Jerk his due, it must be stated he had completely mastered this art; and it was music to a trained ear to listen to the beautiful timing of his regular "left, right, left, right." There were additional complica-

tions when the voice had to carry any appreciable distance, towards a retiring column, for instance, for there was then a danger that it might reach the leading section last and put it a complete step behind, with confusion in the centre. But such was the Jerk's word of command that it defied the laws of acoustics, and every left foot hit the ground simultaneously.

Soon they reached the regimental quarter-master's store, and were lined up outside the door. Here, with a final scowl, the Jerk left them, to return to other organisation work. It was typical of the official mind that a hundred yards was considered too far for a few guardsmen to cover without supervision.

In his own way, the Red Robber was just as formidable as the C.S.M. or Muscles. It was a curious nickname, which rookies simply accepted; its origin was lost, like that of so many others, in the remote history of the battalion. Whether the adjective referred to the erstwhile colour of this particular R.Q.M.S.'s faded hair was a matter for speculation; there was no difficulty in interpreting the noun.

He stood at the doorway, legs slightly bowed from supporting his bulk so long, glassy blue eyes peering from beneath forests of eyebrows, hands in pocket—a privileged person, he broke every rule with impunity. A cigarette rested between his lips. People vary in their method of holding cigarettes. Some, like Dolly, have a professional look; others, such as Nobby, wear them, their mouths being strangely bare and unrecognisable unless a Woodbine dangles there. Then again, there is the rather amateurish, though expensive way, a technique acquired by film stars and Guards officers. Lastly, there are those who 'like the Red Robber' have the appearance of great minds stooping to carnal pleasures for a moment's relaxation.

It was rumoured that the R.Q.M.S. studied French and probed the secrets of electricity into the small hours of the morning, locked in the privacy of his office.

Giving the long line of guardsmen a quick, impersonal look, as one whose lofty thoughts must descend occasionally to common things, he suddenly turned to disappear inside the stores.

"First!" he called.

Cautiously a guardsman entered, extending a pair of socks for inspection. The Red Robber grunted.

"Have you darned these?"

The guardsman looked puzzled, no doubt wondering, in view of the condition of the feet, where he could commence such an operation.

"Well, sir, I——"

"Yerse, yes. I simply asked you, have you darned 'em?"

"No, sir."

"How long have you been in the army?"

The guardsman paled with shame.

"Nearly two years, sir. . . ."

"Yerse, yes. Two years nearly and you still don't know you have to darn socks. It'll be more than two years before you get another pair. Darn them!"

The R.Q.M.S. did not trouble to raise his voice—much—and waste his energy in convulsions, like the Jerk; he had more in common with a serpent hissing and coiled ready to sting.

"Next!"

A second guardsman approached, as timidly as the first.

"Trousers, sir," he said hopefully.

"Yerse, yes. What's wrong with them?" The voice was chilly, but still held a note of impartiality, as of one willing to listen before condemning, even if he has already judged.

"T-torn, sir."

"Yerse, yes. Have you read the newspapers lately? The war was still on this morning. *Have you?*"

The guardsman began to mutter that he was under that impression; but before he had finished the trousers were speeding through the air to lap themselves round his neck.

"Get outside!"

The guardsman hastily retreated.

"Next!"

Though the long queue was being disposed of quickly, certain people at the end were becoming fidgety, transferring the weight of their bodies from one leg to another at intervals, and yawning.

"Deficient of a comb, sir," said the third guardsman to the R.Q.M.S.

Any article a man was deficient of came out of his credits, so the Red Robber made no demur. If a guardsman was prepared

to pay, it was sufficient to prove that the interests of economy were being served.

"Comb, Corporal Perry. Take his name and number—yerse, yes. Don't stand there gaping at me! Go to Corporal Perry. Next!"

A muted chatter came from the end of the line, and wisps of smoke suggested cigarettes.

"Business ain't so brisk to-day," said Nobby anxiously.

"And then, be Jasus, they have the hard neck to turn round and say it's better off than the civvies we are," said Dolly. "Can you imagine the blokes that yap in the House of Commons having a pair of boots thrown at them and still thinking they were better off than the civvies?"

"Imagine the Red Robber," mused the Bishop. "I say, imagine him behaving with the courtesy of a civvy shop assistant. I mean to say, could you?"

It was not entirely inconceivable to Nobby, however, who proceeded to give his interpretation of the R.Q.M.S. under the influence of civilian courtesy.

"Yerse, yes. Nice morning, Guardsman Grey. What would you be wanting this morning? Yerse—I have a nice new line in underpants, straight from Ordnance. Or quite the latest thing in socks. Or was it a nice new battle-dress you'd be looking for? No coupons, no money, just a teeny-weeny hole—bluff, you know. All on the old firm. We have a nice Marina blue here. Then there's a Matilda pink—oh yerse, and there's a new colour you might not have seen before, a constipated brown. Khaki, they calls it. Believe me, Guardsman Grey, it's going to be all the rage. Kindly step on one side, Guardsman Grey, while Corporal Perry takes your measurements. Forward, Corporal Perry, please."

Playing up to Nobby, Dolly glanced at his wrist-watch.

"I'm a bit pushed for time, Quartermaster-Sergeant. You see, the Jerk was after asking me to help him out with a little job, and I don't like to refuse. Not that I'm in the habit of scrubbing floors, but he asked me as a special favour, and he's been so good to me."

"Yerse, yes. But if your'e going to do some scrubbing we can fix you up with a nice suit of denims. Forward, Corporal Perry, please. Won't you step into the showroom, Guardsman Grey, while a model tries it on for you? No? Then have a look how it fits you in the mirror."



Dolly stepped to an imaginary mirror and regarded his reflection dubiously.

"'It's only after being big enough for three or four necks the size of a horse besides my own. Then there's a trifle round the waist. But if I lap it round twice it'll just about fit. It must be very trying for you, Quartermaster-Sergeant, all these troublesome guardsmen about.'"

"'No trouble at all, Guardsman Grey. Not a word about it. A pleasure, Guardsman Grey, a pleasure. Yerse, yes. Give me the number of the Spider, and the room, and I'll have the things sent over. We can't have guardsmen tiring themselves out.'"

"'That's frightfully good of you, Quartermaster-Sergeant,' " answered Dolly politely.

The impersonators broke off quickly when Sergeant Catcham came down the line to remind everyone, and particularly those who persisted in idle chatter, that Company Orders would be graced that afternoon with their presence—or words to that effect.

By this time half the company had been in to plead with the Red Robber, meeting with different degrees of success and unemotional abuse—mostly the latter—and Nobby was now at the door, his mind arranging the final details of the explanations he was about to offer.

"Next!"

A straining, anxious Piggery heard a series of "Yerse, yes," punctuating Nobby's earnest tones, and then Corporal Perry was mentioned. The Piggery exchanged glances and breathed again; Corporal Perry's name signified success.

"Dead on," whispered Nobby, coming out soon after with a new battle-dress, a pair of socks and towel. "Takes you to spin a cakey bar and you'll get there."

"Next!"

Judging by results, the Pigs had put much more craftsmanship into their holes than had the rest of the company. Nearly all were approved by the R.Q.M.S. With respectful demeanour, they extended their tattered garments, spinning appropriate "bars" at suitable moments, to emerge at last, for the most part, triumphant.

The ordeal over, they returned gloating to the barrack-room:

but their pleasure was not so much the pleasure at possessing new clothes as that of having outwitted tyrants, who were always going out of their way to make life as difficult as possible for unfortunate guardsmen.

## CHAPTER VIII

MARTIN had been too preoccupied to find much interest or gratification in these achievements, for though the conflict which had arisen in him over his impending change of rank had been considerably lessened by the news that Janet would be at hand with her sympathy and support, her telegram had raised other problems, and first and foremost that of getting the Commanding Officer's permission to indulge in this further consummation of his marriage. All the perplexities of life were solved either by the C.O. or a company commander, according to their gravity. Serious matters, such as sleeping-out passes, promotion, punishment for absence or non-compliance with orders, were decided by the C.O.; whilst lesser disturbances, such as week-end passes, dusty rifles, or idleness on parade were for the company commander's attention.

One was marched before one or other of these sagacious individuals, and whether the problem involved related to public conduct or private affair, one had little say, and less effect upon its solution; all the decisions taken would be taken by him. If he said "No" or "Yes" or "Two drills," it was so, and there the matter ended; the only part one played was to formulate the request or excuse, or perform the two drills. It was extremely simple, like a savage supplicating a god; though not a mythical deity, who was usually disappointingly noncommittal, and required innumerable priests for the purpose of explaining away his perplexing silences; but a tangible god, who made certain decisions and acted promptly.

Martin borrowed a pen from Gelda and wrote out an application in very neat handwriting. His C.O. was a tidy god who appreciated neatness—he was also an irascible one, who swore violently when careless individuals stuck pins in documents meant for his scrutiny, for he invariably pricked his fingers.

Martin had almost completed the application when the nib flooded and made a blot. Impatiently tearing the whole thing up, he began again:

*Application.*

No. 277220—Guardsmen Roule applies to see his Commanding Officer with reference to being granted sleeping-out pass.

25- - -

Nodd's Barracks.

Commanding Officer.

No. — Battalion.

— Guards.

This time it was written to his satisfaction. Nothing, of course, however brilliantly executed, could ever be quite good enough; such a thing as praise was unheard of; it was merely a question of not offering an obvious red rag to the great man's displeasure.

The next thing was to track down the sergeant-in-waiting, whose chief function was to walk about with the notorious books under his arm and to see that all those whose names appeared within attended the appropriate orders, whether it was the Company Commander's, the Adjutant's or the Commanding Officer's. So many people had their own orders that the drummer-boy on duty wore himself out dashing round the barracks blowing taps, or the warning which went twenty minutes before the form-up.

Perhaps because he was one of the most important persons in the company, the sergeant-in-waiting was generally the most elusive. After a futile search of the Spider, the sergeant's bunk, and the company office, a baffled Martin went over to the sergeants' mess. No one without three stripes was allowed inside this sacred retreat, so he was obliged to go round to the back, where the cook-house or kitchen was situated. Here several A.T.S. girls were busy preparing dinner. Most of the Service girls employed in the barracks were contemptuous of mere guardsmen, but these, to whom sergeants were as common as flies, were sexually quite unapproachable.

From one of these exalted creatures he nervously enquired if Sergeant Swingham was concealed within the exclusiveness beyond, and if so would he mind having a word with Guardsman Roule.

The A.T.S. girl disappeared and he heard voices.

"What does he want?"—plaintively.

"How should I know? If you went and saw him he'd probably tell you."

Never so embarrassed as when the subject of an overheard conversation, Martin coloured.

In about five minutes the sergeant appeared, yawning ponderously, hands in pockets. He was rather plump, with a tiny moustache in the centre of a large face, a pair of small surprised-looking eyes above. Martin was quick to notice that his jacket had several grease marks.

"Would you put this application in for me, sergeant?" he asked respectfully, standing to attention.

The sergeant, who had a trick of glancing furtively about him, yawned again, then suddenly snatched the extended piece of paper as if it were a plan of hidden treasure. He scrutinised it.

"You guardsmen! Why can't you be more careful?" he asked, peevishly. "If the C.O. sees this he'll have a fit. Where's my pen? Always dot your 'i's' when you're making out one of these in future. That's right. Don't forget now."

Having rectified this gross error, Sergeant Swingham glanced at his watch.

"This should have been in earlier, you know. You guardsmen! I won't promise you it'll be put in to-day. But I'll try—anyway. That's right—you have to be at C.O.'s in any case, haven't you? Aren't you for the tapes?"

Reassured on this point, he softened.

"O.K. Be there early."

Martin turned to dismiss himself in a regimental manner.

"Just a minute. You'll be a corporal soon now. That's right? Well, there's something you can do for me."

He paused and glanced about him in a conspiratorial manner.

"The Jerk wants to know something," he went on confidentially, as one person of consequence to one who soon would be. "He wants to know who's writing all those things on the lavatory walls. These guardsmen! Try and find out, will you? That's right."

He winked knowingly to clinch the understanding. Martin was staggered.

"I'll do my best," he managed to say weakly, profoundly disturbed by this commission. Then, pulling himself together: "I don't know quite who it is yet, but I'll soon find out."

It was with a sense both of guilt and treachery that he returned to the barrack-room. So the Jerk had seen the writing on the wall and had asked the sergeant-in-waiting to investigate; or was it that Sergeant Swingham had his own good reasons for wishing the practice to cease? Martin could imagine the Jerk's neck swelling with rage as he sat there reading. . . .

For some time now a vendetta had been going on inside the w.cs. An anonymous person calling himself the Hawk had begun it with an inscription threatening Corporal Abernethy with a terrible fate if he persisted in getting the room up on the stroke of reveille every morning.

Then another called the Phantom had sprung into existence, to threaten Sergeant Catcham with unspeakable tortures, which only a guardsman could devise, unless he repented and mended his ways.

"The Phantom will fix your duff, so keep the eye down," it ended. "Beware. I have spoken!"

No sooner had the Phantom burst upon the company than another terrorist appeared who signed himself Zorro, the name being inspired, no doubt, by a certain film shown in the gym. Like his contemporaries, Zorro had singled out the N.C.O. whom he disliked most intensely, accusing him of not getting up until half-an-hour after reveille.

"Zorro knows," it read. "Zorro will act when the time comes. Zorro is marking time on you, Sergeant Swingham."

This was sufficient to explain the sergeant's anxiety; but it was all too possible that the Jerk had, in fact, instigated the enquiry, for Martin himself had added the name of that august personage. In a rebellious moment, which he now regretted, he had joined the growing band of terrorists, assuming the pen-name of Vampire, and had issued a warning to the Jerk that a horrible end awaited him unless he went absent for the duration of the war. Underneath he had carefully drawn a vampire. The thought that his guilty secret might now be learned filled him with dread.

He suspected Hooper of being the Hawk, because, shortly before it had all started, Hooper had appeared at company orders for lying in bed five minutes after reveille, and Corporal Abernethy had been the witness.

As he entered the barrack-room the drummer-boy began to

blow taps for C.O.'s orders, so Martin ran in to brush his boots and tidy himself generally. Guardsmen were not supposed to appear before their C.O. in anything but their best attire, but his second battle-dress was quite clean and well creased, so he decided to risk keeping it on.

"Bobbing now on the sleeping-out pass," said Snags innocently. "It'll soon be taking me for C.O.'s, too."

"You'll rub all right," said Hoofer generously. "Never took me to bob yet and I allus git theer."

"Tell him the missus won't let you stay in the army, like, unless you can get home every night," sang Gelda.

Dolly was strangely quiet and looked rather sad, as if he had been done out of something.

Stifling again the impulse to make a clean breast of things, Martin hurried out, wondering self-consciously how they would greet him upon his return with two tapes decorating his arm.

The C.O.'s office joined the orderly room on one side and the weapon-training office on the other. Opposite, a miniature square had been constructed, for the purpose of forming up.

All the sergeants-in-waiting had arrived and, assisted by their respective corporals-in-waiting, were rounding up the guardsmen ordered to attend or in the report.

"Fitzpatrick! Jones! Macgregor! Smith!"

"Anybody here yet from Number Four? Where's Jackson?" demanded an exasperated sergeant. "Right, corporal! Go and get hold of Jackson by the short hairs of his"—he pulled himself up in case there should be an unseen officer within hearing—"chest and drag him down here—in double time!"

The sergeants-in-waiting surrendered themselves to the diverting occupation of "spinning the bar" about all the things which interested sergeants-in-waiting, such as the applications each had made. One guardsman was the subject of considerable envy, as he was to be returned to civilian life to resume work as a coal-miner.

"Party—shun!"

As an officer passed, the senior sergeant called the gathering to attention and saluted smartly.

"Carry on, please."

Anyone with a certain small spot on his shoulder, known as a pip, was infinitely superior to anyone without. A single pip made

all the difference between overlordship and serfdom. Officers were not made of common dust like other ranks; their dust was gold dust. Their accents, their mannerisms, their lofty expressions revealed them as super-beings who dined in the same mess as the C.O., only calling him "sir" on parade. They had only to come within a radius of fifty yards of ordinary mortals and the air would be thick with hands flying up in salute. They had only to stutter: "I say, S-sergeant. It's an awful nuisance. Heve you-ahm-seen Mistah Brarn?" and a dozen sergeants would appear to point furiously in a dozen different directions where the figure of Mister Brown had last been seen.

The sergeants carried on as requested, and after giving the order to stand at ease, began exchanging current rumours and then views upon the amorous inclinations of certain A.T.S. girls.

"What are you in for?" one guardsman asked another.

"Long week-end."

"Same as that. What you in for?"

Within two minutes everybody knew what everybody else was in for, and was giving and receiving advice as to the best "bars to spin" to the C.O.

A stern voice calling "Left, right, left, right," interrupted these conversations. Heads turned idly to see a dozen or more prisoners being escorted from the guardroom by the regimental police. It was customary for prisoners to appear washed, shaved, and sober before the C.O., in order to prove that they had not been subjected to violence.

"No room left in the hole nar," observed one guardsman.

"Same as that," replied another. "You couldn't get in the ruddy hole if you wanted to. They won't take any more reservations. They're booked up for months."

"Same at the Shot," said another who had recently been there, meaning the Glasshouse at Aldershot. "Half the bleeding army's in close tack."

"Half the Army?"

"Well, half the Guards," amended the other, as if he did not include other regiments in his conception of the army.

"There's Rafferty again. See him? He only comes back here to go absent again. He'll drop one this time, though."

Suddenly a hush fell on the assembly.

"C.O.," whispered someone, agitated.

There, walking towards them was a little man with a florid face. He came on slowly, hands clasped behind his back, apparently absorbed in such thoughts as only a C.O. could think. But his little eyes were slyly watching the gathering to see if it had spotted him. He always studied his effects.

"Party—shun!"

All had moved quickly enough for the second-lieutenant, but now the speed was such as to deceive the eye; a mere flash. There was a crashing of heels upon the gravel, and thirty bodies were stiff and erect, waiting. . . . He let them wait.

But for the patter of the C.O.'s feet, the silence of death.

It seemed an age.

"Carry on, please."

His hand flicked impatiently, a characteristic, imperious gesture which endeared him to all. On he went slowly, profoundly, up the steps, into his office, every eye following him. Slam!

Not a man but was left with the awed feeling that he had just witnessed some rare, some sacred spectacle. What more was needed but for the heavens to open and a voice to cry, "My son"? Where he had passed seemed hallowed ground. His was the power. . . . His merest whim was resolutely executed by everyone from a company commander to the lowest degraded guardsman sweeping the barrack streets.

For instance, it had been the custom of the regiment to have its service caps set up after the style of the Nazis, but much more correctly. Set-ups had been the subject of intense competition and bitter controversy in barrack-rooms; the higher they were, the more fashionable. Most guardsmen took great pride in their set-ups, and went so far as to break engagements with village belles in order to remain indoors at night, working upon their caps, devising all kinds of methods of adding another half-inch by means of broken button sticks and other suitable pieces of metal. It had become a tradition, the supreme difference between a guardsman and an ordinary "line-mob" soldier.

"You're walking around like an old bus conductor," Snags would say scornfully to Hooper, one of the rare exceptions.

"Suits me, so it suits everybody that matters," Hooper would retort. "I'm not in Fred Karno's army."



"Christ, you'll be taking off soon, like," Gelda would add.

Then Nobby would pick up Dolly's cap, scrutinize it and remark: "Just abart the shape of an effing aircraft-carrier."

"Be Jasus, I'd sooner be putting a set-up on a bowler hat in Civvy Street."

With Liverpool ingenuity, Gelda had soon learned the secret of setting-up caps, and having reduced quite a number to shame, even Hooper at last, had hired his services for the price of a packet of Woodbines.

Then one morning the C.O. had wakened out of sleep and muttered: "No more set-ups."

The Adjutant had hurried into the mess and whispered: "No more set-ups." The company commanders had run over to their sergeant-majors to echo the cry: "No more set-ups." In turn, the Jerk had dashed over to the Spider, demanded the presence of every sergeant, and hollered: "No more set-ups." What the sergeants had yelled at the guardsmen is perhaps better left to the imagination.

It had been a staggering blow, sufficient in any other regiment to have started a mutiny. Since many caps had been so doctored and stretched that they could not be reformed, hordes of guardsmen had appeared at Orders, charged with inflicting wilful damage upon W.D. property. C.B. was handed out all round, and orders to pay for new caps. The battalion had moaned, muttered, but almost overnight it had sacrificed its set-ups to appear on parade next morning just like ordinary soldiers. Such was the power of the C.O.

"Orders—form up!"

After twenty minutes of waiting, the moment for action had arrived.

Everybody sprang to attention and marched at terrific speed, arms swinging like clockwork, legs going like pistons, across the square.

"Get back again! Step short and sharp! Swing the arms straight from front to rear! Orders—form up!"

The speaker was the fiercest-looking person Martin had ever seen, with a masterpiece of a black moustache extending some four inches in either direction and then curling upwards another two. The intricate pattern emblazoned on his arm proclaimed him the regimental sergeant-major.

He was known as the Hound. When Martin thought of Gelda, it was of a perspiring brow and an abbreviated chin; Nobby recalled a sleek head and a classical nose; the Bishop was distinguished by his ruddy hair and twitching eye. "Hound" meant moustache. His face was mainly that. It smote, shook one.

"If you don't get a move on yourselves, I can assure you"—the moustache wobbled—"I can assure you I'll make you move quicker than you've ever moved in your lives, or are ever likely to move. I'll blitz you."

No one doubted him. He looked from one to another, his head moving in sharp jerks, his eyes glittering down his long, thin nose.

Guardsmen were whizzing about in all directions, eventually to assume a pattern in which the Drums were covered off by Headquarter Company, with One, Two, Three and Four Companies behind.

"Settle down quickly. There's far too much time wasted every morning forming up."

Everybody settled down. It was said that the Hound even whispered in the C.O.'s ear advice upon military matters.

Somewhere in Martin's rear the Jerk was hissing instructions upon the best method of settling down.

"Commanding Officer's orders—Fall in!"

It was like a crack of thunder and each sergeant-in-waiting moved like lightning as he took a pace forward.

"Not good enough! As you wererrrr-r-r! I can assure you there'll be some changes unless you get a move on."

Although he had been assuring them of this every morning for twelve months and more, familiarity bred anything but contempt.

"Fall in!"

This time the Hound let it pass.

"Commanding Officer's orders—shun!"

Thirty heels hit the ground simultaneously.

"Asyouwere-r-r! Shun! As you were-r-r! Shun! Asyouwere-r! Shun!"

In technical language, the Hound was getting a "heave on them."

"Commanding Officer's orders, left—dress!"

But the strain of complying with the Hound's as-you-were's had momentarily dazed Martin's brain, and he was a fraction of a second late in taking the pace forward. He at once made a great show to cover it, jerking head and eyes to the left, shuffling his feet and looking to the front again. Perhaps he had not been noticed. But it was a forlorn hope.

"Sergeant-major of Number Three. The guardsman in your company is idle. Take his name!"

Martin trembled; it was always unnerving to hear one's name echoing across the barracks.

"Guardsman Roule. Idle on parade, sir!"

The Jerk needed no encouragement in the matter of taking names; it was the breath of life to him, his religion.

Martin knew he would now have to attend Adjutant's Orders to-morrow, where he would probably lose his name again and therefore have to attend the following day, and so on *ad infinitum*. He was glad he had written that message to the Jerk on the lavatory wall.

"Stand at—ease!"

This, at least, appeared to be done to the Hound's satisfaction, for having glared at them over his moustache, he cried: "Call the—roll!"

A strange thing happened, its meaning no doubt buried somewhere in the archives of Guards' tradition. Sergeant Swingham turned about smartly, walked round Martin, called him up to attention, sniffed at him, stood him at ease and resumed his original position.

"Commanding Officer's Orders—shun!"

After a suitable pause the Hound demanded: "Are you present, Drums?"

"Prensir!"

"Headquarters?"

"Prensir!"

The other companies were similarly questioned in turn, the sergeant-in-waiting of each replying in the affirmative.

"Commanding Officer's Orders—march off!"

An outsider might not, perhaps, find this order exactly lucid, but the N.C.Os. understood it well enough; they all turned to the right, marched four paces and then suddenly turned into flesh

and blood. They began talking to each other as if C.O.'s Orders was the most ordinary thing in the world.

From this point onwards, the proceedings gathered momentum. It was like flying round and round in a whirlpool, to be shot suddenly to the centre, the vortex, and sucked in.

"Where's the corporal on the door?" ejaculated the Hound from somewhere behind his moustache.

The corporals-in-waiting, upon whom in turn fell the honour of opening and closing the door as people charged in and out of the C.O.'s office, looked accusingly at each other, until one of them sprang up the steps on to the verandah. Corporal Abernethy had done it yesterday and lost his name for opening the door idly.

"March in!"

Two sergeants sprang to attention, shot into the office and then shot out again. As there were no corporals for orders, the guardsmen were lined up by the sergeants-in-waiting, the Jerk calling out suitable stage directions.

"Guardsmen—shun! Quick march! Left, right; left, right; left, right. Swing your arms up!"

The Jerk barked the time out as quickly as the movement of his lips would allow, and somehow the line of guardsmen managed to keep to it, simply tearing across the road, up the steps and into the office.

Once inside, the Hound, who was standing on the left of the C.O., took over, with: "Mark time! Left, right; left, right; left, right; left, right. . . ."

When at last he relaxed and told them to halt and then to turn to the right, with two "as-you-weres" thrown in for the benefit of the C.O., the guardsmen were all sucking in air like vacuum-cleaners.

The room was stifling. Everyone felt it except the C.O., the Hound, the Jerk and another C.S.M. To the unfortunate men who had just experienced and survived the wrath of the R.S.M. and the fantastic acrobatics known as the "form-up," and now had to encounter the C.O. face to face, the atmosphere seemed almost overwhelming.

The C.S.M. of Number Two Company took a brisk pace forward and stated: "One guardsman in the report, sir. Guardsman Baghurst——"

He paused, waiting for the exhausted guardsman also to take a pace forward.

"Wake up, man!" snapped several voices simultaneously, and it seemed to Guardsman Baghurst that a thousand mouths baring a thousand sets of teeth were ready to tear him to pieces if he dallied a moment longer. He took a pace forward.

"On the twenty-fourth of this month, this guardsman assaulted another guardsman by striking him a blow upon the chin, sir."

The C.O. glanced up, a vacant expression on his face. At the moment, Guardsman Baghurst looked scarcely capable of assaulting a fly.

"What have you to say?"

He had a squeaky voice which detracted largely from the majesty invested in him by the military machine.

"T-thank you for the leave to speak, sir." The spirit of democracy uttered a last smothered cry and fled in shame. "I was swatting a wasp, sir, and his chin got in the way."

The C.O. hesitated; but whether the guardsman had calculated his mentality correctly will never be known, for the Hound intervened, and when the law-breaker fell in, it was with the knowledge that he would be losing several pints of perspiration on the square for several nights.

There were some more cases, and then the Jerk took a pace forward.

"One application, sir," he snapped. "Guardsman Roule!"

Martin had the wit to take a pace forward at the appropriate moment.

"Applies to see his Commanding Officer, with reference to being granted sleeping-out leave."

The dangers which beset him having driven all rational thoughts from his mind, it came as a mild surprise to Martin to be reminded he was applying for a sleeping-out pass. With a start, he also recollected he was to become a corporal.

"Is your wife coming down here?" inquired the C.O., bored.

"Sir."

"Get leave to speak!" thundered the Hound, his regimental soul outraged.

"T-thank you for the leave to speak, sir."

The C.O. nodded magnanimously.

"Yes. She's coming down to-day, sir."

The C.O. nodded again, and uttered the only word that guardsmen liked to hear him say.

"Granted."

"Fall in!" snapped the Hound.

Martin obeyed. No sooner had he done so than the Jerk was off again.

"One guardsman ordered to attend your orders, sir, for the purpose of being promoted to corporal. Guardsman Roule!"

Martin did what was expected of him; life consisted largely of taking paces forward. Though he dared not move his eyes from a spot he had chosen on the wall, he could feel the Hound's glittering eyes boring into him, and the sensation sent shivers down his spine.

"Oh, yes. I hear this man has been doing very well—er——"

The C.O. glanced to his right, where Martin became aware of a number of officers standing mute and humble, like mourners at a funeral.

"Oh yes, rather," said one of them whom Martin recognised by his voice as Padi, the Company Commander. "He's done awfully well at morse. I could do with a morse instructor."

Martin felt that Padi was only bluffing his way, as all company commanders liked to give the C.O. the impression that his company was swarming with guardsmen who "did well."

The C.O. transferred his gaze to Martin.

"Well, it's up to you to keep it up. Keep your wits about you. We'll see how you go on, and if you prove yourself suitable you'll get paid for the stripes."

"Take your jacket into the tailor's shop straight away," snapped the Hound. Then, "Corporal—fall in!"

Martin reeled backwards, his fate sealed, and remained in a stunned condition until he was marched outside, where the cold air revived him.

## CHAPTER IX

ONE hand on the door-knob of the tailor's shop, Martin hesitated. He glanced dubiously at his sleeve; soon it would be decorated with chevrons to proclaim him a corporal

before all the world. He took a deep breath, one of his last as a guardsman—a profound thought. The thought was so profound, and suddenly so daunting, that his hand froze on the door-knob. How had this calamity befallen him, and why had he let it go so far? There had been time enough since the Jerk's assumption that he actually wanted the tapes for him to have stopped it. Why had he not done so? In a moment of self-revelation he knew that he had been afraid, afraid of the Jerk, and then afraid of telling the Piggery. And now he was afraid of facing them with the damning evidence upon his arm. Still, what was there to be afraid of? They'd blackguard him, of course, but as soon as that was over, they ought to be pleased to find themselves with a corporal who wasn't going to be regimental, as Snags, for instance, would have been. He'd be a cushier corporal than Snags; why shouldn't he be just as good a one? He thought of the telegram in his pocket. Janet would be surprised, too; surprised and proud. He smiled to himself. Still, women didn't realise—couldn't realise. Ah, well; better get it over and done with. He turned the handle and went in.

He glanced round timidly. Considering what went on inside, it ought to have been light, but it was gloomy. It was not so much a room as a series of shelves, built on three sides and stacked with battle-dress. On the fourth wall was pinned an imposing array of photographs of various sizes and subjects, intermingled with daring cartoons of the Hound, the Jerk and other battalion celebrities.

A counter barred the customers' way, and upon it sat two guardsmen cross-legged, surrounded by still more battle-dress.

The room had character, it was different, it was privileged. All other rooms in the barracks were brushed, scrubbed and formalised each day; they were identical; but this was different, a broom here would have started a dust storm. Though similarly situated in the heart of a grim world where men marched about all day swinging their arms up, a world which rang with the cries of frenzied N.C.Os., and over which a little man with a squeaky voice had the power of life and death, it seemed entirely unaware of it. It had a self-absorbed, unruffled calm. However much in theory the C.O. had the right of access to every room in the barracks, the right to poke his nose in and inspect, as he regularly

did, Martin received the impression that there was only one ruler here, and that was George, the sergeant-tailor. It was his kingdom and he reigned supreme.

The tailors continued to prod methodically with their needles, either too engrossed in their work or too indifferent to the outside world even to glance up at it.

Martin coughed.

A pause followed, dark with uncertainty.

"Yes?" said one of the tailors, still engrossed.

Only a person conscious of privilege could have acquired that tone.

"I want tapes," murmured Martin. "On this jacket. Is there any chance of you being able to——?"

He stopped lamely as one of the guardsmen looked up to focus a pair of vague-looking eyes upon him. Martin was taken aback. True, he had not expected them to leap over the counter and dance rings round him, but this complete indifference to the momentous news he had imparted left him speechless. One half of the world, he perceived, could be made into corporals and the other half think nothing of it.

"See him," said the spokesman of the cross-legged guardsmen shortly, going so far as to jerk his thumb over his shoulder.

Something moved in the shadow, something bulky with a shining pate, which Martin presently recognised as George. The sergeant-tailor was sucking at an unlit pipe and poring over the *Daily Mirror*. That he was an elderly man of at least forty, Martin could tell by the cracked, weather-beaten skin of his neck. Peering into the gloom, Martin perceived that it was the fascinating figure of Jane in the newspaper spread out before the sergeant-tailor that engaged his attention. Every morning there was a scramble in the Naafi for Jane, who ran Popeye close for favourite.

The last thing in the world Martin wanted to do was to interrupt George's pleasure, so he waited meekly. He had been here once before, to have the neck of his battle-dress altered. He had had to wait three weeks for it. Considering the loaded shelves, he wondered how long he would have to wait for the stripes. Well, the longer the better, so far as he was concerned.

George looked round.

"Yes?"



The campaign for national economy had obviously been extended in George's establishment to include speech.

"I would like," repeated Martin, "two stripes on this jacket—that is, if you could manage it."

George considered.

"Why?"

Martin was shaken; some things are so obvious they are hard to explain.

"Well, I've just been to C.O.'s and the R.S.M. said to come in here."

He congratulated himself on having put the responsibility upon somebody else.

George considered again, then glanced at the shelves.

"We're very busy."

"Perhaps I'd better call back?"

Sucking his pipe audibly, George's attention wandered back to Jane; but apparently he was still revolving Martin's question in his mind.

"See him," he said presently, jerking his thumb towards the guardsman who had just referred Martin to him.

Feeling rather like a tennis ball, Martin obediently turned back in the direction indicated, but the guardsman continued industriously to ply his needle. After a while Martin began to wonder whether he had not completely lost contact with everybody present; so he cunningly shifted his weight on to a creaking board to regain attention. The head of the original spokesman looked up. Martin breathed again.

"Still here?" asked the guardsman, and was about to jerk his thumb again at George when Martin removed the racquet from his hand with: "He said see you."

"Oh! We're very busy."

"The R.S.M.—" Martin began again.

"Well, what do you want, anyway? I'm not a mind-reader."

Martin had never been under that impression.

"I've just been to C.O.'s, and the R.S.M. said come straight in here. I did."

"And what do you expect me to do?" asked the guardsman, irritably. "Prick myself?"

"Shall I take it off?"

"What?"

"The jacket."

"Why?"

"Why not? I mean I should have thought it would have been easier to sew two stripes on . . ."

"Two stripes?"

"Yes," exclaimed Martin, losing his temper. "Two stripes."

"Well, take it off. I can't sew them on on your arm."

Martin took off his blouse and held it out.

"Put it down there."

As Martin did so footsteps sounded on the verandah outside, and Sergeant Catcham entered. He could not recall ever having been pleased to see the sergeant before, but now, at any rate, his entry should cause a stir. However, the cross-legged guardsman merely jerked his thumb again in the direction of George. Democratic though it might be, that thumb was beginning to annoy Martin.

"Is my jacket ready yet? Be Jasus, I'm walking about like a beggar," said Sergeant Catcham.

George, who was still immersed in Jane, looked up with a frown.

"I wouldn't be knowing. Ask him."

This time he indicated the second guardsman, who, laying his work aside, uncrossed his legs very deliberately, as if to express within the bounds of decorum exactly what he thought of sergeants and their jackets, and moved off casually to another pile of battle-dress. He began slowly to rummage.

Martin looked curiously at Sergeant Catcham. This was not the sort of treatment he was used to. Surely he would be on the point of exploding? But no; nothing happened; he seemed to swallow the insult without even noticing it; and Martin had pictured the guardsmen as springing up and falling over each other in their efforts to serve one so formidable. How were the tables turned! How were the mighty fallen when they were once in the hands of their tailors!

"Getting the tapes sewn on, eh?" enquired Sergeant Catcham genially, as one friend to another. But perhaps he realised to what depths he had sunk in Martin's estimation and was attempting to gloss over it—bluff his way.

At a loss for words, Martin nodded.

"You look after them, boy," continued the Sergeant, becoming paternal. "You'll find out they're worth keeping. Missee, I've been made up now two years—six months after I came up as a conscript. I wouldn't be without 'em now. Some day you'll be glad of 'em."

Conscripted? It was difficult to imagine anyone conscripting Sergeant Catcham. Hitherto, Martin had regarded him as an old sweat, a pillar of the Regular Army; but only two and a half years! Martin made some rapid calculations and came to the conclusion that Sergeant Catcham must be no more than twenty-three years old, five years his junior. Extraordinary! He had the assurance of a man of thirty-five, and an experienced one at that. Martin suddenly realised that he had always considered N.C.Os. as old, much older than himself. Now, for the first time, he saw them as they really were, boys, young men. Amazing! Perhaps he himself would now be regarded as a man of the world by newcomers to the regiment. There was no telling, he might even gain the assurance of one, become another Sergeant Catcham. The thought was ludicrous, but interesting.

"Are you going to the show to-night in the gym? It's going to be good. The last Ensa one was a turn."

In the light of his vision, Martin began to regard this new Sergeant Catcham, sociable, intimate, almost with condescension, and marvelled at the difference two stripes had made. Or was it due merely to the impartial influence of George's shop? At any rate and whatever the reason, he was now breathing the same air as the platoon sergeant.

"Well, you see, I'm expecting my wife down here this afternoon."

"Your wife?"

For a moment the other looked sad and thoughtful and rather young. He made no reply.

By now the guardsman had gone through the pile of battle-dress and turned round.

"No," he stated simply.

If this was a blow, the sergeant withstood it well.

"Can you get it done for to-night, then? I'll come in about five I say, George, will you get a heave on yourself?"

The apologetic tone excused the order, and Sergeant Catcham sank still lower in Martin's opinion.

"I might."

Sergeant Catcham turned to open the door, but, suddenly changing his mind, approached Martin instead. With a furtiveness reminiscent of Sergeant Swingham, he glanced round, then, drawing very close to his new corporal, he began to whisper. Martin was, by now, getting used to whispers; he was also acquainted with the strong smells with which the barracks reeked. Whatever might be said of army life, it could not in fairness be described as odourless. The cook-house, the incinerator, squads bathed in perspiration on the square, socks, to mention but a few instances, all gave off their own strong and various exhalations; but Sergeant Catcham's breath was something new, and though Martin tried to endure it, he was obliged to retreat.

"You're a corporal now," the breath was saying mysteriously, "so I can tell you. The Jerk was after asking me to find out something. You might know something about it. Who's writing all them things on the lavatory walls? Keep the eye down and see what you can find out. Be Jasus, if I fluff to him, you'll only see a cloud of dust between the company office and the guardroom. He won't know whether he's a Spitfire or a Mustang."

Reeling backwards pursued by the relentless breath, Martin reached the counter, where he was obliged to stand his ground.

"Yes, yes. I'll keep the eye down," he answered hurriedly.

Once more the sergeant turned, but again he changed his mind and came back. Martin shrank.

"I don't care who it is. You march him straight to me. I'll fix his duff, sharp. Got that?"

Martin assured the sergeant that he had.

With a final nod and a last look round, Sergeant Catcham departed, leaving Martin with the feeling that if in the last minute he had endured much, he had at least been spared much all the rest of his life. Recovering himself, he observed to his chagrin that his blouse was still untouched beside the cross-legged guardsman; so, fortified by his recent passage with the sergeant, he approached him firmly.

"It's not very warm in here," he said.

The guardsman looked up, his eyes vague.

"No."

"Specially without a jacket."

"P'raps it ain't. I wouldn't know."

Then, as Gelda would have said, he fluffed, that is to say, caught on, and turned to his colleague, who was apparently his junior.

"Run two tapes up on here," he said. "You'll do it in two jiffies, Harry."

"Only two?" queried Harry.

"Two on each arm. This bloke's waiting for it."

With the same deliberate movements as before, Harry put down the work he had returned to and uncoiled; but there was one thing to be said for him, disillusioned though he might be, when he had once made up his mind to a thing, he faced up to it and got it done.

Tiring of the depressing sight of so much battle-dress on the shelves on three sides of the room, Martin whiled the time away by inspecting the fourth. It was quite an art exhibition. There was no doubt of the ability of the photographer, whom he presumed to be George, nor of the directions in which his enthusiasms lay. Jock Jenny dominated the show. Famous throughout the regiment, Jock was now a P.T. sergeant at the 4th Battalion, though in former days he had earned a precarious livelihood as a professional boxer. Jock, whose body was much easier to look upon than his face, was depicted in various attitudes, striking, with an impunity denied the unfortunate Baghurst, different guardsmen on the chin.

George was also an admirer of the female form, and was not without taste in that direction either; Martin wondered how he had managed to persuade these tender creatures to pose with such come-hither frankness. If Jock was the star of the exhibition, he was closely contested by George's immodest young ladies, who stretched luxuriously on sunny beaches and, in general, saluted the rising sun.

Other photographs struck a more topical note, of long and immaculate rows of guardsmen, boarding troopships and trains by numbers, roasting in the desert, freezing in the snow, with the same drilled look as when they were on the barrack square or mounting guard at Buckingham Palace. One gathered that Guardsmen went everywhere and were always—Guardsmen.

But it was the cartoons which intrigued Martin most. To possess such sacrilegious objects at all, let alone pin them up for the world to see!—there was no shadow of doubt that George and his realm were securely established. Two were particularly striking: one was a mere moustache, the other a bulging neck. They were executed with some ability, and labelled respectively "The Hound" and "The Jerk."

Something caught Martin's eye in the corner, the signature of the cartoonist, written in tiny print, but just discernible. The Bishop! What a neck to sign them! It was unbelievable. Queer hawk, the Bishop. Altogether a talented person.

"Here," said a voice.

"Oh, thanks."

Martin looked with awe at his sleeves, now decorated with two new clean stripes. This, then, was his jacket! There was nothing left now but to put it on and walk through the door, a changed man—and set the barracks humming.

Nothing, however trivial, escaped the notice and comment of guardsmen. The smallest mannerism was observed and imitated; any idiosyncrasy, such as getting into bed with socks on or reading in the bath, was at once broadcast; while physical peculiarities, like knock-knees or protruding teeth, were turned into jokes or nicknames. As for hot news—the return of the latest absentee, a sergeant reduced, a guardsman promoted—all this was subjected to intense and prolonged discussion. Everything was everybody's business, and it was torture for the sensitive.

Martin put his blouse on and looked down at it. How the stripes glared! There was no doubt about him being a corporal—and a very new one at that. From an old sweat of nearly two years' standing, he had become a rookie again. Yet, he reflected, even the Hound had once been a new corporal.

Summoning up his courage, he left George to his Jane and the two tailors to their battle-dress, and ventured into the critical world outside.

His first fright came at once; a guardsman was walking down the footpath towards him. He told himself he must keep his head and try to give the impression that he was so used to stripes as to be unaware of them. The guardsman, whom he did not recognise, was tall and powerfully built; he was walking down the centre of

the footpath, which he continued to occupy as Martin approached; but in spite of an aggressive chin, he suddenly yielded, when no more than a yard separated them, and stepped with a deferential glance into the roadway. If it had not been for his stripes, Martin thought, this burly individual would probably have pushed on unconcernedly, winking an eye, perhaps, by way of salutation. And with the realisation that guardsmen would no longer confide in him with knowing winks, the new corporal felt suddenly lonely. This was the penalty of power.

"I say," he said.

The man stopped and stood to attention. Alarmed at what he had done and wondering how he could undo it, Martin sought for words.

"Do you know what time it is?" he asked lamely.

"Just about to go a quarter-past twelve," answered the other, anxious to be exact, then waited rigidly for the sign of dismissal.

"Thanks."

The guardsman shuffled to his right and walked off quickly. Assailed by misgivings, Martin stumbled on. This was no good; he must take hold of himself, adjust himself to the new conditions.

Now he was on the other side.

Shortly after this disturbing incident, his guilty eye detected the Bishop hurrying towards the tailor's shop. That was too much. Seized with panic, he darted round a hut; and though the distance was negligible he found that he was panting. For the moment at least he was safe. Nervously, he looked down again at his stripes. They glared back at him accusingly. They were too bright, too new. Impulsively he grabbed a handful of dirt and rubbed them. Now to face the Piggery. He had procrastinated too long. He had better brave the storm and get it over. Reluctantly he moved on.

## CHAPTER X

EVERY week a major, the chief instructor of the battalion, his staff of two typists and a sergeant considered, and where necessary approved, training programmes submitted to them by the company commanders. At the beginning of the week one of these interesting sheets was pinned up in each barrack room, so

that every guardsman knew exactly what miracles were expected of him from half-past eight on Monday morning until 12.15 p.m. on Saturday; such items as "1100 to 1145 hrs.—P.T.—Gym" or "1030 to 1430 hrs.—route march—outside barracks" drawing groans and other expressions of pain from those to whom they were addressed. Besides these, further sheets were issued to the instructors, who at five minutes to ten every morning could be seen consulting watches and programmes in turn, although each knew from long experience at precisely what moment the break began.

The battalion was programme-conscious and worked to the last minute, but not one second longer.

Whenever two or more were gathered together, for any purpose whatever, it was known as being on parade. Army life consisted essentially of parading; every minute of the day one was definitely either on or off, and it mattered nothing if it was the drill-square, the weapon-training field, or only picking up match-stalks round the company area.

As the last parade of the morning ended at 1215 hours—programme time—and dinner was not ready until 1245 hours, the Piggery passed the intervening time in resting. Hooper came in, tired as usual, made his bed down hurriedly and flung himself upon it, to go off promptly into a noisy doze, and after Nobby, the dance-band enthusiast, had jumped on Dolly's bed to switch on the set, creating some hideous oscillations before eventually tuning in to an appropriate programme, the Piggery curled up one by one in search of oblivion. At swabs call they would stir and prepare; at "Cook-house" they would spring up and run.

When the door opened, Gelda turned over and feigned sleep—the company was swarming with N.C.Os. who thought nothing of robbing men of their well-earned rest by detailing volunteers to do all sorts of odd jobs. Looking cautiously out of one eye, he saw Martin.

"Did you rub at C.O.'s?" he enquired idly. "I suppose you spun him a soft bar, like."

He could never really rest when anticipating a meal, and was glad of an excuse to raise himself on one arm.

"The Bish. got done stupid for his rifle on parade," he remarked. "Only half a ton of rubble up the spout. The sergeant——"



He broke off and his mouth fell open.

"Christ!" he exclaimed.

Sensing a minor sensation, Nobby slowly opened an eye, and, like fingers trickling down the keys of a piano, cautious eyelids parted one by one to the far end of the room. Only Hoofer continued to doze. What it had taken Gelda several seconds to observe, Nobby perceived instantly.

"Somebody march me quick to the M.O.," he gasped. "Something tells me I'm lying on the sands of Libya watching a mirage."

"That ain't no mirage," muttered Gelda. "It's a ruddy miracle. Two tapes, eh? He's only warm, like. Not a word to anybody—as if one of us was getting made up every day."

Martin grinned sheepishly.

"Be Jasus, and what's after coming off here?" demanded Dolly. "Why did they have to pick on you? It isn't that short of corporals they are."

"Better keep the eye down," warned Nobby, "or he'll march you, sharp. He's a desperate type."

By now the Piggery had definitely abandoned all thought of its siesta and rose to enjoy the sensation, Dolly switching off the radio to enable them to bring all their faculties to bear without distraction.

"Fly guy," said Gelda, disillusioned. "I always knew he had a low streak in him somewhere. He's got Snags bobbing all right now. Not half and snatch it."

Snags was plainly mystified, and though he feigned indifference, he could not keep his eyes from Martin's sleeve.

"Unpaid, unknown, unwanted," he muttered, with obvious disappointment. "They asked——"

"It's shook you, too."

"Not at all. The Jerk asks me if I'd take them a month ago, but when he explained that only nine corporals in the company were paid and there wasn't a hope of the other nineteen ever being—well, I used the loaf and turned it down."

"Like I turned my leave down last March," snapped Gelda, still apparently partisan, in spite of the frail flesh which forsook the fold for the vainglory of stripes.

"Yes, and me my ticket last April," added Dolly.

Realising that something unusual had disturbed his peaceful

half-hour, Hooper opened a belated eye, then the other as if he feared he might still be dreaming.

"I see you got theer," he observed at length, though without his usual composure. "Still," he added, by way of exoneration, "I reckon there must be some nice people get made up into corporals after all."

"They tell me there's some nice jailers at Dartmoor, like," supplemented Gelda, swinging back to the other side.

"Well, if you've got over it at last," said Martin in some desperation, "somebody might give me a cigarette."

Perhaps to show that even if their loyalty had been badly strained a spark of friendship still remained, Gelda delved into the depths of his pockets, and extracted a crushed packet of cigarettes.

"They're only Tanners, like," he excused himself before the watchful Piggery, as with a dramatically trembling hand he offered one to Martin.

"Stand to attention when you speak to him," said Nobby nervously. "I don't want to be carrying your blankets darn to the guard-room to-night. I've told you he's a bad type. He'd think nothing of wheeling you in sharp. Corporals would march their own grandmothers."

"Starting already," sniggered Snags, referring to the annoying habit of borrowing without intent to return, of which most corporals were guilty.

In silence Martin lit the cigarette, every eye watching the movement of his hand, as if two stripes had endowed it with strange new properties.

Then, wishing the floor would open and swallow him, he passed on to his bed. He deserved all these jibes, he knew, and there was nothing he could say; excuses were out of the question, worse than useless; they would only worsen the future without improving the present, which, he now saw quite clearly, had nothing to do with the past. The past was dead. A chasm now yawned between him and the Piggery; an impassable fence—two stripes.

His one desire was to escape. The moment his back was turned, of course, the room would buzz with real, with thorough criticism. His friends discussing him. The thought was un-

pleasant; but at least it would get it over. If he could only devise an excuse for leaving the room now, the next time he entered it they would all be a little more accustomed to him; his third entry would occasion, perhaps, no more than a few disparaging remarks, until eventually they would get used to him, and come to accept him as part of the scheme of things. Time, habit, would bring about the necessary readjustment; nothing else could. Eager for any kind of action to end the strain, he considered walking out straight away, to give them their opportunity; but his feet seemed rooted to the floor.

Getting its second breath, the Piggery began to dwell with dark relish upon the complications which it was pleased to foresee as arising out of the changed circumstances.

"It'll be taking him for waiting now. If there aren't bags of registered letters when he's second-in-waiting we'll get him done wild."

"And he'll be after doing guard. You'll have to be in on time when he's on the gate, or, be Jasus, if you're a minute pushed he'll have you inside."

"He'll be in charge of the room, like."

"It's just abart going to be dog-rough."

"Dog-rough at Nodd's."

"Hoofer'll have to be up sharp at reveille, the Bish'll have to scrub his own bed area and the corporal's now. We'll have to cut about. Takes us to bob."

"We'll fix his duff."

"Ah, well, we'll git theer."

The Piggery had surrendered itself to the diverting pastime known as "blackguarding." It was the habit of guardsmen to blackguard at the least opportunity. Even when the Hound "got a barrage" off the P.T. corporals on the drill-square by referring to them as inmates of a muscle factory, or told the M.T. corporals that it was to be hoped that they could change gear better than they changed step marking time, he was sometimes only indulging in blackguarding. In his most sunny moods, the Hound would blackguard left, right and centre all day without putting anyone in the book—though there was one unfortunate corporal whom he booked every time he saw him, because, it was said, he was so intrigued by the savage expression on the corporal's face

whenever he formed up for Adjutant's orders. In short, to blackguard was to utter abuse with the tongue in the cheek.

"Vanity, vanity, all is vanity," quoted the Bishop, who had just entered.

"Same as that."

The door opened again, this time to reveal the imposing waist of Sergeant Swingham edging in sideways to avoid a jam. A moment ago the Piggery had been wide awake blackguarding; now it was wrapped in slumber. All except the Bishop, but he was only a trifle late in adopting a recumbent position.

Sergeant Swingham was the sergeant-in-waiting, and when the sergeant-in-waiting came anywhere near a number of men with a few minutes on their hands it was policy to avoid his eye, for if one arm hugged the books, the other was notoriously free to point indiscriminately to: "You, you, you and you! Report to the company office straight away!" And it was not so much specific individuals he chose as anxious eyes which caught his own. Guardsmen were expert psychologists.

"You guardsmen!"

He glanced round furtively, as though fearing they might all spring up and make a concerted attack upon him.

"Have you all got your washing in the stores?"

When no one answered, it was always a sign of assent.

"You have. That's right. Now don't you bring any more or you'll go in the report. I shan't tell you again to get it in early. Lying in bed at this time of the day! You guardsmen! What do you do at night?"

"It all depends if I'm on a week-end," said Nobby *sotto voce*, so that only his bed-mate could hear.

"Same as that," agreed the bed-mate in a whisper.

Seeing Martin, the sergeant approached with a confidential air. Martin trembled. Was he about to be ordered to put somebody in the report or perform some equally unpleasant task?

"These guardsmen!" said the sergeant, as one ally to another. "See nobody takes his washing in now. I'm sick of them and their washing. Go and help the storeman check up, will you?"

Grateful for the excuse, Martin fled.

## CHAPTER XI

ON Tuesday afternoons a red laundry van called to collect the battalion's dirty washing; and owing to a passion for exactness on the part of the owners, who, when a thoughtless guardsman wrote the figure "1" against the item "socks" on the laundry card, took it literally, it was considered necessary to keep a thorough check. To facilitate this, the washing had to be tied in neat bundles in such a way that every article was revealed at the edge; if this regulation was not properly carried out the person concerned was in danger of losing his name.

The bundles were then checked in the stores adjoining the company office, and though this was largely the responsibility of the storeman, a corporal was detailed to supervise.

Owing to the prejudiced outlook of the official mind, which regarded all guardsmen as criminals or potential criminals, even storemen, who ranked among the most respected and privileged people in the battalion, were not entirely above suspicion. No one who had not proved his integrity by earning two stripes could be relied upon to perform the meanest task, to run the simplest errand—not even to find somebody wanted by the Jerk in double-time. Errands were the special function of the corporals; other no less specialised jobs, such as supervising the washing check or the scrubbing of floors, being of secondary importance.

"Oh, hello. There you are, corporal. Well, that's better," said the storeman tactfully, as if he had been waiting for Martin all his life.

Chesty, as Guardsman Kershaw was called because of the distressing attacks of bronchitis which assailed him every year, was only meagrely covered with flesh, his clothes hanging loosely on an angular frame.

"You've come to check the washing, eh? You'll find a pen on yon table," he went on. "Well, that's better. It's nearly half-past twelve, so we've gotta gerra move on. But I dare say we'll get through it now. There's the book on the table. Sithee!"

Chesty's quiet, natural behaviour was such as to restore in Martin a long-lost feeling of confidence and ease. Chesty was a

rare creature, always anxious to oblige; just as the Jerk found his pleasure in taking names, and Nobby in entertaining blondes in London over the week-end, so Chesty's object in life seemed to be to oblige all and sundry, irrespective of rank. He was a North-countryman, and though he had led a roving life in many countries, he still retained something of his original accent.

"What do you want me to do, then?" enquired Martin eagerly, overcome after his recent experiences by the kindness of a fellow being. "It won't take long if we get stuck into it."

"Nobbut look down your list while I call the names out. Do you gerrit now? Atkinson—one shirt, one towel, one socks pair—kind of business. Simple, ain't it? Get the chair and make yourself comfortable. It's no use killing yourself when you don't have to."

He moved over to the table as though to convince himself that Martin would not kill himself, then returned to the pile of washing. His long arms hung loose as he moved with a peculiar pottering gait, punctuated with hops.

The door opened and a head peered round.

"Got any four-by-two there, Chesty?"

"No, but I gorra brother works at the co-op."

The storeman had an unusual though inoffensive sense of humour. He was not only a mine of information, ready at all times to give an erring guardsman paternal advice, but a more material mine as well, able at a moment's notice to dig up almost any kind of object from a corkscrew to a harmonica. In spite of the fact that he was now rather busy, he put down the bundle of washing he had taken up to tear a strip off a roll of flannelette used for cleaning rifle barrels.

"Don't tell everybody, now," he said, hopping confidentially up to the door, as if he feared the guardsman would race round the passages proclaiming this windfall to all and sundry.

After this interruption, they returned to the business in hand.

"I was made up to-day," Martin suddenly confided.

The storeman looked up.

"Oh, was you? Well, of course, I knew you was. It's no use my saying I didn't. You're doing all right now, eh? Nobbut a two-three more, an' we'll have finished with the A's. Then——"

"I say, Chesty. Have you a piece of string there, sharp?" enquired a head from the doorway.

Chesty hesitated. Nowadays string was as precious as gold. It wasn't as if he got issued with it.

"No, but I gorra lace in my boot."

Once more he dropped his bundle of washing and hopped over to a drawer neatly filled with odds and ends, from which he extracted a small ball of string which he had intended to use to tie up a parcel to his wife.

"There you are. Now don't go and tell everybody—kind of business, will you?"

"Not at all," promised the guardsman, snatching the string.

As they neared the end of the B's, Martin gave way to a growing urge to talk about himself.

"My wife's coming down this afternoon," he said.

"Burton—one pants, one shirt, one socks pair— Is she? Well, that's better. I'm glad to hear that. You'll be all for it, too. I should myself. But you know how it is; the old woman's got dug in up yonder and I don't like to drag her—you know what I mean. Buxton—two pants, one handkerchief, three socks pair . . ."

"I suppose I shouldn't get her down, really. You see, she's expecting a youngster, but it'll make a change."

No sooner had Martin made this disclosure than he wondered why he had done so. Hitherto it had been a secret between himself and Janet. But there was something about Chesty that drew one, inspired one to confide; and it suddenly seemed to Martin that so long as kind, simple men like Chesty existed, spreading their warmth among cold or disillusioned hearts, life was still worth living.

"Is she now? The first one, eh? Well, don't worry; it won't be so bad. It's better to get it over with while you're young—kind of business. When my——"

"I say, Chesty! Have you got a bicycle pump, just while I go home for my dinner?" asked another urgent voice from the doorway.

The storeman glanced at the alarm clock on the table. Though well behind schedule, he found time to dig out a pump which was carefully hidden under a pile of blankets, and with his usual advice about secrecy placed it in the impatient hand.

"I mean to say," he excused himself to Martin, "you never know what you'll be wanting yourself one of these days."

The battalion had many stores, but none so fascinating as this. Theoretically it came under the jurisdiction of the company quartermaster-sergeant, whose importance among the non-commissioned personnel was second only to that of the Jerk; but Chesty was the man in charge; it was his nest and his character pervaded it.

This drab room oozed Chesty's generosity. And this was all the more surprising because of the nature of some of the articles it harboured. The most conspicuous were seven sinister-looking boxes containing Bren and Tommy guns and magazines. Further observation revealed a large pile of plain dust-ridden blankets and, in one corner, a number of kit bags, the property of men on leave or in hospital. Five rifles suspended by hooks from the wall told a tale of absentees. There were two beds, one used by Chesty and the C.Q.M.S., who often dropped in for a game of chess, and the other by Tabs Parker, the company clerk, under the window at the far end of the room, and a dozen pairs of labelled boots ready for repair were ranged neatly beside them.

Ostensibly this seemed no place for the escapist, and yet it contrived to emanate an atmosphere of peace, which made it seem for Martin a retreat in the midst of a disciplinary prison.

"I don't suppose it'll be too easy finding an address to stay at with so many people sleeping out of barracks," said Martin, pursuing thoughts which had been troubling him since the arrival of Janet's telegram.

"Faulkner—one towel, two vests, one sock. Now here's a mistake. It just shows you can't be over-careful. Yes, I darst say it will be a bit of a problem finding billets. But you're sure to get dug in somewhere. I did know of a place once, when your man, Pony Miller, was here, before he went away to the 2nd Battalion—but it's gone clean out of my loaf. Oh, there's sure to be two-three places, if you cannot but drop right. Funny how things go. It'll come to me, though, just when I least expect it. Fielding—one pants . . ."

They were getting towards the end of the K's when the door-knob began to turn slowly and silently. After a cautious interval, in stole Hoofer, concealing something behind his back. Seeing there was no one of more importance than Martin in the stores, he sighed with relief, and then revealed a bundle of washing.



"I shouldn't, you know," protested Chesty. "If the sergeant-in-waiting or the quarter-bloke came in, he'd run me in sharp. But go on. Stick it on yon pile. That's better."

Hoofer took a deep breath.

"Thought I'd just git theer," he muttered, winking a wary eye at Martin as he departed.

Either there were only a few L's, M's and N's in the company, or the people bearing those initials were managing for another week, for Chesty had soon made big inroads into the alphabet. The pile of checked washing now surpassed the other and was mounting rapidly.

There may well have been some mistakes, for Martin found the writing tedious, and was too preoccupied to concentrate. In between the items, he managed to slip his hand into his breast pocket to withdraw his A.B.64, which contained something much nearer his thoughts.

"You haven't seen my wife, have you?" he asked rather superfluously, for it would have surprised him considerably if Chesty had answered in the affirmative.

"Hoofer—one gym vest, two handkerchiefs, six socks pair—six socks? Nobbut three pair here. No, I'd be telling a lie if I was to say 'Yes.'"

Patiently Chesty took a proffered photograph, to regard it with approval.

"Nice bit of kit, too. There's nobbut one thing wrong with yon. It's only a piece of paper. But I reckon that'll be remedied to-night. What time——"

"Oh, Chesty," cried a familiar voice from the doorway. "Could you be after giving a pal the lend of a stamp till the Naafi opens? It's a letter to the missus I want to get off in double time."

Dolly gave Martin's stripes a respectful look and then, as Hoofer had done, winked a wary eye. Embarrassed, Martin winked back.

"Would you like me to be after licking the envelope for you?" asked Chesty, not without his wit.

It was not Dolly's habit to permit a remark of this nature to pass unchallenged, but he was in too big a hurry to bandy words.

"Get a heave on your big idle body; swabs has just blown. You gotta keep the eye down when Corporal Abernethy's in waiting. Bagged the Bishop yesterday and got him a drill for being three

minutes pushed. He's like your man there—a nice bloke, but nobody likes him."

Unable to refuse a call for assistance, even though it involved sacrifice, a drain upon his slender resources, Chesty obediently took a stamp from his wallet and gave it to Dolly.

"Don't be forgetting the time and the place."

"Listen to Shylock! You know I'll give it you back as soon as the Naafi opens."

A clatter of footsteps signified Dolly's departure.

Only a few more bundles now remained to be disposed of, then Martin's first assignment as a corporal would be successfully fulfilled. Nor would he regret it, for the effort of following the long if limited list of guardsmen's underwear was becoming a strain, pants and socks interrupting thoughts of Janet and of finding rooms for her without having to go round all night from house to house like a hawker.

"Thomas—one socks pair—I just fluffed."

Chesty looked triumphant. Martin waited while the storeman arranged his thoughts.

"I remember now," went on Chesty, "I wrote it down in my pocket-book. You never know what you'll be wanting. It all comes in useful."

He took a worn diary from his pocket, and presently Martin was in possession of the address where Pony Miller had resided before leaving for the 2nd Battalion.

"It nobbut seven days since, so you ought to rub there easily."

Then another interruption occurred. The sound of footsteps tripping down the passage turned out to be the sergeant-in-waiting, who burst somewhat agitated into the room, hurried straight over to one of the beds and lay down panting. Apparently Chesty considered this quite normal, for he went on with his work.

Easily puffed owing to the encumbrance of a substantial waist, the sergeant soon regained his breath and his voice.

"Have you got an aspirin? That's right. For goodness' sake give me an aspirin."

Chesty considered. Though able to lay his hands on a large range of articles, there were deficiencies, nevertheless.

"No, but I got some salts that would shift a valentine," he said resourcefully.

If the thought-association was unconsciously suggested by the sergeant's ample girth, the latter seemed not to notice anything.

"That'll do. These guardsmen! They're more trouble than infants at a kindergarten. They must think you've nothing to do all day but nurse them. Then the Jerk wants this; Padi wants something else. Then they both decide they don't want it at all, but something completely different. I don't know whether I'm coming or going. First I'm chasing off to the orderly room, then I'm back at the company office, then I'm off to the orderly room again. Buzzing around like a blue-arsed fly. That's right. They must think I'm a streak of lightning."

Martin was obliged to cough to conceal a smile at the thoughts of anyone mistaking Sergeant Swingham for anything but Sergeant Swingham, while Chesty slipped to the wash-house to fill a mug with water. To this he added two spoonfuls of salts, and handed the solution to the sergeant.

"These guardsmen!" went on the sergeant, eyeing the mug distrustfully before sipping. "Nothing but applications. Showers of them. There'll be nobody left in barracks soon. Grey, Hooper, Bishop—the whole company applying for sleeping-out passes. That's right, the whole company. There's an epidemic. I don't know where they manage to get all their wives from. They can be single enough when they're spinning soft bars to these local females in the pubs. I've heard them. That's right. I——"

"Sergeant Swingham! Sergeant Swingham! Sergeant Swingham!"

The distant voice was impatient.

"There it goes again. It's the only bloody name they know in this company."

Every alternate word Dolly uttered was either an oath or Army slang, and Nobby every third, yet it came as naturally from their lips as water from a tap. But it was so unusual for Sergeant Swingham to indulge in strong language that Martin started; the man must be really upset. However, long years of discipline asserted themselves, and the sergeant tripped off obediently in the direction of the voice.

As Chesty stooped for the last bundle, a bugler in the roadway outside began to blow "Cook-house" call. Martin rose to stretch his legs.

"Well, that's better. Nobbut just made it, though," observed the storeman, yawning. "It's surprising, you know, how you can get down to things when people leave you alone—kind of business."

"I suppose you are interrupted occasionally," replied Martin, ironically. "But it's been so quiet this last quarter of an hour you'd hardly think there was anybody else in barracks besides us."

"No, it never was busy, to speak of, between twelve and one——"

Once more the door opened, this time to reveal the ominous figure of the Jerk. Martin stiffened. Even when prepared, he always felt guilty as the Jerk approached; taken unawares, his flesh crept.

"What's coming off here? Have you nearly finished?"

Seeing the neck swell dangerously, Martin quickly considered the questions; one never knew what to say for the best, for any question might result in a torrent of abuse if the answer did not happen to suit the Jerk—or even, perhaps, if it did.

"Yes, sir," he ventured, standing stiffly to attention.

He stole a look at Chesty, who merely hopped over to get a knife, fork and spoon from his greatcoat pocket, and, apart from glancing cautiously at the C.S.M., gave no recognition whatever of his presence. But, as he made to slip by in answer to the bugler's summons, the Jerk detained him.

"No. Don't go for a minute."

Martin was stunned. Here was the man who reduced a hundred others to trembling automata every morning on parade requesting someone, a mere guardsman, not to go. It was a revelation, the Jerk off duty, the Jerk unmasked. Fascinated, the young corporal awaited developments.

"I want some cotton-wool if you have any. This ear. It's giving me gyp."

"Oh, yes, sir. Well, I've nobbut a bit left in yonder drawer. I'll get it if you like, sir."

If he liked! Martin's values were sent tottering. The Jerk with earache! This man of iron stricken with pains which even children knew; pains which reduced him to ordinary flesh and blood, made him go grovelling for cotton-wool.

"Yes. I've just got a bit left. Is it troubling you badly, sir?"

It was apparent to Martin that the storeman used the word "sir" only as a matter of form.

"Oh, Corporal Roule!"

The C.S.M. might be no more than a wounded animal creeping to this sanctuary for relief, but he could still be dangerous, and Martin was taking no chances.

"Sir," he answered, as if ready to fly to the end of the earth at the other's bidding.

"Have you seen the C.Q.M.S. about your ration allowance for sleeping out?"

Of course he had not had time, not even to think of it. But the Jerk's tone made him feel guilty of gross negligence, utterly incompetent.

"I'll go straight away——"

"Wait! Wait! Wait!"

This was almost the old superb tyrant. Almost—he would never be that again; as he tore them round the square in the morning, as he wheeled them into Company Orders, as his neck swelled with rage at the mistake of a shrinking guardsman, he would never again reach that pinnacle of despotism. Martin would know, and the Jerk would know he knew, about the earache.

"Tell him you want it making out from to-day."

"Sir."

## CHAPTER XII

THE company office, the hub of this small military domain, was divided into two compartments. Lower ranks only approached under compulsion; it was dangerous ground, and passers-by held their breath and kept their eyes down. The general opinion was that it had been constructed solely for the purpose of enthroning a disagreeable person who presided at Orders and indiscriminately inflicted extra drills and parades upon innocent guardsmen.

To most guardsmen the word "office" was synonymous with Orders, and some were so simple as to imagine that the department of State known as the Foreign Office was a tribunal for inflicting injustices upon aliens. Needless to say, their sympathies in this instance were with the aliens. But many things went on inside the company office unknown to guardsmen. Other means of

torture than that of bathing them in perspiration on the race-track, as the square was called, were devised in secret behind its doors. Conferences were held in which route-marches were plotted, campaigns planned, both infinitely more arduous than an hour in marching order on the square.

Then there was correspondence to be dealt with, a continual strain upon the company commander's creative ability. All letters were laboriously written in longhand and given to Tabs Miller for typing, nine out of every ten being addressed to the Adjutant, the chief instructor, or the C.O., whose offices were no more than a hundred yards away and interconnected by telephone. All four seemed to delight in writing to each other at the slightest opportunity, about guardsmen who were going on courses to other units, or to watch demonstrations, or proceeding to hospital and other places to which guardsmen went in pursuit of a successful prosecution of the war. Each spent many happy hours in keeping the others thus informed. Duplicates were made, which, together with replies, were filed and stored in a wooden box, and left to decay.

Other files contained precedents of programmes for infantry training and all manner of schemes from simple attacks to complicated withdrawals. There were also reminders about venereal disease, read out at regular intervals by a blushing subaltern to the company on pay parade; others on careless talk and security, and records of scales of pay and increases in allotments.

"Yes, be Jasus!" Dolly would say. "They give you a tanner with one hand and take a bob away with the other. The last increase they were after giving us, cigarettes went up. Now it's railway fares. Do they think I'm going to stay in this dump without seeing the missus in three months?"

"You can always tell," Gelda would put in, "when something's going up. They always give you a copper first, like, to square it. Now it only costs as much for a single fare as it did for a return."

A constant stream of other notices arrived from the industrious headquarters of the South-Eastern Command; all required filing. Some folders contained information about guardsmen—mostly routine stuff, such as occupations, dates of marriages, names of children, and frequently more intimate details about domestic tangles—separations, divorces and affiliation orders. There were

not many guardsmen without skeletons in their cupboards. Certain inquisitive people, like Snags or Gelda, would have been delighted to feast their eyes on the sordid details of the lives of some of those around them. But fortunately only Padi and a few other discreet individuals had access to these documents, so the company slept peacefully without fear of blackmail.

Still more files were full of conduct sheets, damning documents for the most part, which prevented many a long week-end. Countless the touchingly innocent "soft bars" recited by crafty guardsmen at C.O.'s Orders, only to be neutralised by the evidence of conduct sheets.

"Yes, sir," Gelda would be saying, anxious but, on the whole, optimistic. "That's it, sir. The missus is going in the A.T.S. next week, sir. I only want to see she's all right, like, before she goes up."

"And give her the benefit of your experience, no doubt," the C.O. would reply in an attempt at humour.

Then as Gelda metaphorically rubbed his hands in glee, the Hound would push the conduct sheet under his superior's nose, and, beads of perspiration gathering on his brow, Gelda would note the resultant change of expression. On the whole, it paid to have a clean sheet.

There were other documents shrouded in mystery called A.C.Is., which had to be accommodated somewhere. The significance of these may be understood when it is realised that the authors of *King's Rules and Regulations* had in mind as their victim some reluctant, homesick wretch shanghaied by press-gangs, whom it was necessary to bind and bewilder with such a multitude of restrictions that he hardly dared bat an eye without being placed in close arrest. Progress is perhaps best reflected in certain orders called A.C.Is., circulated from time to time in this enlightened era, relaxing the most feudal of these restraints.

Recently one had been issued that went so far as to permit men to proceed out of barracks in civilian shoes.

All these vital mandates should have been posted in conspicuous places; but this was not the practice at Nodd's Barracks, where only those approved by the C.O. were published, and then merely as extracts in Part 1 Orders.

But as Nobby often said: "This ain't the army. It's the ruddy Guards."

As well as the files already mentioned, at least five more were set apart for copies of Part 1 and Part 2 Orders. These were sheets compiled by the Adjutant, in between writing to his colleagues, giving instructions and advice about battalion affairs. Cyclostyled in hundreds in the orderly room, by an army of clerks and A.T.S., they were handed by the Hound at Evening Orders to a corporal-in-waiting, who spent a weary hour delivering them round the barracks. One could always tell who really counted by whether they were considered important enough to have their own private copy of "Part 1 and 2." The C.O. received one, the chief instructor another; others went to the regimental quartermaster, the Dental Officer, the Medical Officer, to mention only a few. For the benefit of other ranks, they were also exhibited in public places—the different messes, the Naafi, the Spiders.

Part 1 Orders provided information about battalion routine, such as times of battalion parade (which never varied), church parade and black-out. The names of the picquet officer and P.A.D. control appeared, together with that of the captain of the week, all of whom performed tasks essential to the smooth functioning of the barracks. Then there were general notices about new decreases in the soap ration, courts-martial, summaries of evidence, and impending exercises. The place was scoured daily for hot news, and all that concerned the battalion as a whole went on Part 1's.

Its supplement, Part 2, served rather a different purpose, and was no more than a list of names. Little escaped its compiler. All absenteeism, desertion, reduction in rank, promotion, and leave was recorded, all marriages and deaths. If Mrs. Gelda had a son or Dolly's missus changed her address, the whole battalion knew of it. In this way everyone was kept closely informed about everyone else.

Treading softly past the company commander's compartment, Martin entered the next, used by Tabs Miller and Nutty Parry, the C.Q.M.S. As both were busy with the grave affairs of the company, the new corporal waited, roving eyes scanning littered desks for inside information. In here one had the feeling of being in close contact with those who stood at the Heart of the Mystery, that military secrets saturated the place. One strained one's eyes and ears to learn them.



Voices came from Padi's office next door.

"That's good," Padi was saying. "Yes. Another good one there. Now, about Hooper—not so good. Fair for weapon training, fair for drill, fair for turnout. That's bad. Hooper is below standard. I think the answer to Hooper is more personal supervision."

"He knows it all right, sir," came Sergeant Catcham's voice. "He's a bit of a queer hawk—a chancer, sir."

"That may be," said Padi curtly. "But it's your job to see he isn't. The answer is, he mustn't get an opportunity of chancing his—er—arm. We've no time for slackers in this company. See he understands that."

Sergeant Catcham was "having a barrage" taken off him.

"Sir," he answered prudently, though stiffly.

It was an awkward moment.

"Don't you agree these weekly reports are very useful, Sergeant Catcham?" went on Padi smoothly, as though no unpleasant moment had occurred.

"Oh, yes, sir," the other assured him, since the difference in rank obliged him to; "I'm all for them myself, sir."

Martin guessed that the sergeant's fingers were tugging at his moustache. He recalled that one evening, when he had returned to the squad-instructor's bunk with tea and cakes from the Naafi, Sergeant Catcham had been poring over an elaborate diagram recording the squad's progress, chewing his pen and generally behaving in the manner of one who found mental concentration painful. He was essentially a man of the sword. When it took him for waiting, or barrack guard, the effort of filling in the different forms, such as Guards Form 9, made him quite savage, especially when he overheard a finicky guardsman at the notice-board pointing out that there was no "h" in trees, or only one "f" in rifle. Briefly, if his duties incurred the use of pen and paper, he was liable to bag anyone just for looking at him, perhaps from a perverted sense of poetic justice. In view of this, Martin found this harmony on the usefulness of reports amusing.

"That's good," continued Padi. "Another good one there."

Of course, 'Padi' was not the name his parents had given him, though all uncommissioned ranks throughout the battalions of the regiment called him by no other. Months ago, before the whole army signal procedure had been altered, a battalion code

name had consisted of a four-letter pronounceable word, "Padi" being that of a certain unit to which the company commander had at the time been posted. On every exercise his voice had been heard so often, at the end of every field-telephone, saying "Padi speaking," or "Padi moving to so and so," or "Padi now withdrawing," that guardsmen had automatically begun to jerk their thumbs in the direction of the company office, with: "Padi's taking Company Orders this morning."

"Yes, that one's good," repeated the company commander. "Then there's the matter of the new corporal—Roule. He had an excellent report on morse—excellent. I think we shall find a number of uses for him. Yes, lashings of morse. That's good."

"Now, about the new corporal," went on Padi, becoming confidential. "The whole point is this: the sergeant-major was insistent that Snags was obviously the one to fill the vacancy. Roule, he thinks, is too—er—too timid. He may be right, but I'm not so sure. What do you think, Sergeant Catcham?"

There was a pause.

"Oh, he'll develop, sir, no doubt," came the sergeant's discreet reply.

"In Snags, I'll admit, we have a born disciplinarian with a certain aptitude for drill, gunnery—as most men have; but simply dull, stupid at morse or map-reading and such things. Now, I think morse is a test of a man's intelligence, and if I'm right, Roule is simply oozing with it; and it's a morse instructor I want."

"Yes. He's very quick, sir, when he wants."

"Now, I think Roule might surprise the sergeant-major," continued Padi. "Naturally, he'll be on the Corporals' Course later; but give him plenty of practice and responsibility. Bang him into it—handling the squad, marching them to the lecture-room, and so on. Yes, that's good, and, of course, as you know, Sergeant, the strictest discipline is imperative with new N.C.Os. The slightest slip, the report. Nothing like the report. That's the only way a man learns to become a good N.C.O."

Having thus overheard his future being arranged by his superior officers, it was to Martin as if he had received his death sentence—a sentence of living death.

He heard no more, for Nutty was now rising, no doubt to go

over to the guardsmen's mess to call the men up to attention while Perky asked if there were any complaints.

"Yes? What is it?"

Nutty's head was large and shaped like a globe.

"Excuse me, sir. The C.S.M. told me to see you about sleeping-out rations."

"Bugger off," snapped Nutty. Guardsmen said that these two words, or others with the same meaning, were the only ones he knew. As he left, however, he relented sufficiently to call over his shoulder: "Give the particulars to the clerk."

Another period of waiting ensued.

It will have been gathered that the few privileged guardsmen of the battalion were those serving in administrative capacities, key men; but all paled into insignificance beside the company clerks, the élite, the chosen of the chosen. One awaited a trifle impatiently the pleasure of tailors or storemen, but with clerks one just waited.

Martin's gaze settled on a letter on the desk addressed to Padi from the regimental paymaster. He read:

"Subject matter No. 271 . . . Gdsm. Clarke.

"In view of the affiliation order made in respect of this guardsman the weekly sum of five shillings . . ."

Intrigued by this revelation, Martin read it through again. Poor Nobby! Life was not always a piece of cake then for people of his fatal charm and gay susceptibilities.

"Yes?" queried Tabs, looking up professionally like a C.S.M.

"I've been told to give you particulars about sleeping-out ration allowance."

Compared with red-necked guardsmen, Tabs looked anæmic, due to being sheltered from wind and rain. His fingers were long and elegant, while his feet, no less elegant and long, stood out at right angles as he walked. Hence the name Tabs.

Grimacing, he added three more names to a list he was making and reached for a folder on a shelf.

"Name!"

This was bluff, for he knew almost every name and number in the battalion from memory. With an air of condescension, he added Martin's to another list.

Lists were the passion of all company clerks. On the slightest pretext, they seized pencil and paper and wrote columns of names—of men for leave, for courses, increase in pay, for anything at all. Just as the next compartment was crammed with files, this was smothered in lists.

"Corporal Roule," said Tabs shortly, returning the list with care to the folder.

"I wonder," began Martin, offering Tabs a cigarette, "would you mind——"

The clerk not only accepted it, but felt for his own matches, so Martin considered himself privileged to continue.

"I was just wondering——"

Presumably the tone of voice conveyed the meaning, for automatically Tabs took another sheet from the shelf; he got at least half his cigarette ration in this way. Even sergeants could be seen at times wooing him with cigarettes and whispering anxiously in his ear.

Invariably they began the same way:

"When does it take me?"

"No vacancies this week," Tabs might say. "None till next week-end, unless the C.S.M. gets some from another company."

"Will you see if you can fix it, then? I want to get my leave this week instead of next or it'll be too late—the wife, you see——"

At times Tabs could show remarkable understanding, and for a small consideration would fix matters.

Though Martin knew he was not for leave until next month, it was reassuring to have the date confirmed. Leave of any kind, privilege, compassionate, or only a short week-end, was a subject guardsmen never tired of discussing, and if for the first six weeks they spoke of nothing but their exploits on the last, for the next six they could think of nothing but what they would do on their coming leave. This was only to be expected, since every other day, including Sundays, they were at the beck and call of everyone from corporals upwards, and having thus lost their freedom it was all the more precious when temporarily regained.

Tabs' fingers moved so swiftly down the long column that by the time Martin had arrived at the fifth name he was turning to the next page.

"Got it!" he exclaimed. "Doesn't take you till next month."

"Thanks."

Tabs was hardly the conversational type. He merely nodded, returned the file and plunged forthwith into the fascinating task of compiling another list. Martin glanced at the clock. Already five minutes late for dinner, he hurried away, wondering if the wrath of the corporal-in-waiting, who saw dinners up, could still be vented upon him in spite of his promotion.

He was half-way to the cookhouse when the Jerk rode by on a bicycle, but, seeing the corporal, he fixed him with glassy eyes and dismounted.

"I want a word with you."

"Sir."

"It's about those silly writings on the lavatory walls. What do you know about them?"

"Nothing, sir."

He knew the Jerk was only bluffing, and in turn now found it almost effortless to bluff him. He was only a loud-mouthed man with a pain in his ear.

"Well, I want you to. Understand? Find out who is responsible and report them to me."

"Sir."

The Jerk turned to remount, and Martin continued towards the cookhouse.

"Wait! Wait! Wait!"

"Sir."

"Keep this entirely to yourself. Understand?"

"Sir."

## CHAPTER XIII

LIKE all meals, dinner disappeared down ravenous throats before one could say "Bees-knees." The cooks might somehow contrive to fill all their working hours in the preparation of a well-balanced diet to replenish the energy of sagging guardsmen, but it would not seem from the state of the potatoes that they exerted themselves unduly in doing so. At the same time, the speed with which the food vanished seemed hardly to justify what little effort they did expend.

Disturbed at the prospect of a second encounter with the

Piggery, Martin tried to slip by their table unobserved; but Gelda was too quick for him.

"Doin' all right, wakky?" he greeted Martin. "Put yourself in the book for being five minutes late. If you was only a buckshee guardsman like, instead of a lance-jack, you'd be conducting yourself to Company Orders to-morrow. Come on. We'll let you sit with us. We saved a place for you. Now we got our own corp, we don't want any buckshee one bumming the load at our table."

"I think it would be a gesture he might appreciate," said the Bishop, "if we allowed him to distribute the victuals. I mean, he must set an example now by attending to the wants of guardsmen."

"He's a corporal, not a skivvy," said Snags.

"My dear man, you're splitting hairs."

"Sure he should dish it out," cut in Nobby. "Why do you think we saved a place—to admire his beauty?"

Martin wondered if Nobby still admired the beauty of the commercially inclined recipient of his pleasure.

Dolly then expressed another point of view.

"And who, for Jasus' sake, is going to be after waiting that long? We could be on creasing parade while we're waiting here."

Dolly referred to half an hour's nap the Piggery usually indulged in after dinner, which incidentally creased battle-dresses carefully laid out after midday beneath the bedding for that purpose. The Piggery took great pride in its creases and missed no opportunity of improving them. For special occasions such as leave, Hooper, because of his weight, was often required to sleep on four or five pairs of pants.

Feigning an air of resignation, though he would have been greatly concerned if he had been done out of the job, the last-named took up a large spoon and began to serve. Anything to do with food attracted him strongly, and at the Piggery table it had become an institution for him to officiate. It was a prerogative he guarded jealously.

"It's no use him starting now," he said slyly. "His missus'll be making sandwiches to bring to-morrow and he won't be eating with us any more. I'd be all for the civvy tack myself."

"Same as that," agreed Dolly, glancing at Martin in envy.

The Bishop began blinking one eye at the thought.

"When you get the missus down," put in Gelda, "it'll take you to settle down to some proper soldiering—but they don't give you much encouragement when they makes such bad types into corporals."

"I wouldn't be settling to this bleeding life," muttered Dolly, "if they brought me twenty missuses down."

"That might be a bit unsettling," remarked the Bishop.

"So you can't take it," jeered Snags. "It's just getting you down."

"Listen to steel-chest!"

Glad the conversation had steered into less dangerous channels, Martin took the nearest plate and began eating.

"Some more casualties," observed Gelda, eyeing the meat critically. "Must have been another big air-raid, like."

"I suppose you want pork chops," returned Snags, "with fancy bits of paper on the end so you can chew the bone without dirtying your mitts."

"Let your meat stop your mouth," advised Hooper. "Some nice people were casualties, anyway. We'll git theer, just the same."

"Yeah, clean people too. Spit anywhere."

Guardsmen's conversation was like all-in wrestling; anything was permissible. Gelda proceeded to give some detailed descriptions of cows' after-birth and other revolting objects calculated to make his comrades vomit or leave their meals in disgust. But all were hardened to such tricks.

"What you looking so happy about, Corp?" inquired Nobby guilelessly, returning to the original subject.

Martin coloured. Though his nerves were on edge, he must on no account show it, for it was considered a sign of weakness to reveal the slightest discomfort.

"He only looks like he found a tanner and lost his memory."

At a loss for words appropriate to this blackguarding, the young corporal wondered if Corporal Abernethy or Sergeant Catcham had endured the same torments. He saw Sergeant Catcham enter the mess-room and look about in search of someone. He hoped it wasn't himself. Apparently not, for the Sergeant went into the cook-house.

"Some nice people lose their memory," said Hooper.

One by one the Piggery slunk away to get in half an hour's creasing parade before the afternoon programme began.

With a shrug, Martin rose to supervise the swabs.

With creasing parade in view to spur them on, this was one of the few occasions when guardsmen displayed that initiative so much vaunted by the Press as the British soldier's supreme quality. Laden with plates, the swabs were already streaking to the cook-house.

"If you don't get a blinking heave on yourself, I'll scuttle you sharp," one of them was saying to a solitary figure at a table. "I don't get paid for this, you know."

Grumbling, the solitary figure went on chewing.

Someone entered the mess-room, looked about and then came rushing at Martin. Trickling with sweat, he stood gasping for a moment.

"Are you in-waiting, Corp?" he demanded wolfishly. "Has my dinner been saved? I've been art on a stunt."

This was a perplexing complication; from the way the man looked at him, Martin saw he was expected to produce a dinner from up his sleeve. He supposed he'd better see the cooks, and moved off with that intention, the guardsman clinging to his heels like a dog after a bone.

The cook-house, spacious, bathed in a permanent mist of greasy steam, was connected to the mess by two double doors. On the left, shelves were stacked with dirty plates, to which the swabs were continually adding more. A cook was speedily reducing the piles of crockery by throwing the plates to another cook, who put them on a conveyor. The conveyor entered the depths of a huge complicated piece of machinery, which engulfed the dirty plates at one end and discharged them clean at the other. A plate, flying through the air, missed the second cook's hand; but instead of breaking, it bounced up from the floor intact. Martin knew that if he himself had dropped the plate it would have cost him about two shillings.

"It should have been kept back for me, you know," said the guardsman, implying that, although he wanted his dinner, he did not wish to create trouble.

"Don't worry yourself. I'm just going to see about it."

But how? The new corporal looked at the conglomeration of



vats, bacon-cutters and swank-machines (sausages were always called "swanks"), where cooks lurked and conspired over the next meal. While to ordinary soldiers the army consisted of bren-guns and drills, the cooks saw it in terms of concocting mixtures for filling vats and feeding swank-machines. To attract the attention of one of the cooks, Martin leaned over a long iron cupboard guarding the secrets of the cook-house. While cooks moved about their sacred domain with impunity, others only ventured beyond the cupboard in peril of their lives. But Martin did not lean there long, for the cupboard was used for drying the clean plates and keeping dinners warm, and was burning hot.

"I'm entitled to my rations, you know, Corporal," said the guardsman, as though hinting that the more his hunger increased, the more his wish not to create trouble diminished.

"I've told you not to worry. I'm not, so why should you?"

Suddenly a mess-man loomed out of the haze. While the gippos—as all cooks were called, after the gravy that went by that name—could be compared with wholesalers, and the guardsmen with consumers, a handful of people known as "mess-men" acted as middlemen. Their function was to draw the dinners and store them in that part of the long metal cupboard reserved for their use, until the swabs came to convey them to the tables. Two served each company.

"A man here wants his ration," said Martin hopefully.

"Where's the chit?" demanded the mess-man coldly.

Feeling that, if he had been drawn into this, he wasn't going to accept any responsibility, Martin turned to the guardsman.

"Where's the chit?"

"I ain't got no chit," returned the guardsman defensively, scenting trouble.

"He's got no chit."

"Anybody that's late must have a chit signed by an officer or someone in charge. That's how it is. How do I know he isn't trying to get double rations?"

The mess-man shrugged and walked away.

"I'll git marched then," said the guardsman pugnaciously, now fully prepared for trouble.

Guardsmen might submit to being hunted on the square, bullied in the barrack-room, swindled out of pay or even privilege

leave, but none was prepared to go without his dinner. Realising this, Martin became more anxious. Perhaps the master-gippo was the man to see. But there were reasons for avoiding the sergeant-cook; besides being fanatically patriotic, he was reputed to be liable to brainstorms and often chased his assistants round the cook-house with a carving knife. Perhaps it would be wiser to approach an ordinary gippo first.

Rather less important than company clerks, gippos and mess-men were still, of course, far superior to guardsmen. It was hard to believe that they fared on the same meagre rations allotted theoretically to each man alike, for, like many of the officers, all were beefy and ruddy, bursting their skins like huge sausages.

"I've seen 'em," Gelda often swore, "and the quarter-bloke, swiping other men's rations of bacon. I think I'll apply for a ruddy cook's course."

"Same as that," Hooper would agree.

For all that, most of the gippos were classed as unfits, categories B and C. Many were old sweats who had campaigned in different turbulent outposts of the Empire, to be rewarded perhaps with regrading and dug-in jobs for this reason.

Together with other unfits who performed the menial tasks of the battalion—barrack-sweeping, cleaning lavatories—they formed Headquarter Company. If detailed for a duty other than their work by an ignorant sergeant-in-waiting, all could produce scrolls signed by the medical officer with such long lists of ailments that it seemed a miracle for them even to walk. Yet it was significant that H.Q. Company led the way at sports, the gippos being the champion tug-of-war team, while a mess-man held the battalion cup for boxing.

"Doesn't say much for the country when they can't even find you a bit of scoff," said the guardsman indignantly. "It's not like they loaded us up with pay on a Friday. I'll git marched."

To be marched was not unlike appealing to the House of Lords. Not only could a corporal march a guardsman to the Jerk or the Hound for insubordination or a similar irregularity; if a guardsman considered himself victimised, he could demand a corporal to march him. It was a drastic course, and one had to feel fairly confident to involve a warrant officer. Indeed, for anyone to take such a step was always something of a sensation, sending reverberations

round the whole barracks. The idea of having to march this guardsman horrified Martin; he almost preferred the master-gippo.

But another mess-man, belonging to Number Three Company, loomed out of the greasy haze, and Martin's hopes revived. Tash Marsden, with round shoulders as if from stooping to oblige guardsmen, was the exception to the mess-men rule.

"There's a man here," said Martin. "He's had no dinner yet. I'm not the corporal-in-waiting, you know. I'm only doing him a favour. Is there any chance——"

Tash was sympathetic, but firm.

"I only work here," he answered modestly. "There must be a chit or—see the master-gippo."

Tash disappeared into the bowels of beyond. He was a busy man, for besides drawing dinners from the gippos and dry stuff such as bread, margarine and jam from the stores, which were kept in an ante-room at the far end of the mess, he always relieved the pressure on the swabs out of sheer good nature by brushing up the crumbs artfully concealed under the tables. He was usually pushed for time, for after meals gluttons like Hoofer and Gelda often hung around the ante-room to beg an extra crust or a drop more tea. At week-ends he was delayed still more. It was quite a racket. When so many were up at the Smoke on short passes and others out for an afternoon, what remained of Number Three Company swarmed round his ante-room, snatching the surplus rations like wild animals at a zoo. While other mess-men locked themselves in ante-rooms with stolen rations and buckets of tea, Tash gave away the last crust. Disgruntled guardsmen were often heard to mutter: "I'm going to put an application in for a transfer to Number Three."

"Wait here and I'll see the master-gippo," said Martin.

Summoning up his courage, he plunged through an opening in the long metal cupboard. Groping his way through the vapour, past bubbling vats and scorching ovens, he presently discerned a huge figure whose brilliant red face was emphasised by the white of a spotless overall, and whom he instantly recognised as the master-gippo.

The man was terrific. Every part of him from feet to head was enormous; but his most arresting feature were the eyes, large, bloodshot, and bulging like a frog's.

"What you athter, now, den?"

He lisped. A final, grotesque touch.

"There's a man had no——" began Martin.

"I don't care a damn how many men dere are! What are you doing in here, den? Tell me dat!"

"Looking for worms," suggested another gippo thoughtfully, standing near.

"Did you never know, den, dat you didn't come in here? Didn't you know? How long have you been in de army?"

Martin quailed before the bulging eyes, and then noticed a carving knife lying near the master-gippo's hand.

"No, Sergeant—I——"

"Who's de Admiral-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, den? Did you ever hear, den?" demanded the master-gippo.

Confronted with this, Martin's bewildered brain seized up. Yet a lot depended upon the answer. A guardsman's dinner, perhaps, to begin with. Vainly he racked his memory, but the only name that occurred to him was Mickey Mouse.

The bulging eyes gloated.

"You didn't know? You never heard of him, den? And he comes from County Cork," cried the master-gippo. Clearly that made it worse. "Who's the chief of staff, den? And he's anoder Irishman from County Cork."

"General MacArthur," said Martin. He knew he wasn't, but it seemed better to say something than nothing. At least there was such a general.

"Have you got to send all de way to America now for your generals, while der's still good men left in Eire?"

"No, Sergeant. But——"

"Who's de Jerry general in Africa, den?"

The eyes waited intently.

"Rommel."

Suddenly the master-gippo let out a blood-curdling yell.

"A bloody Fifth Columnist! Knows all de Nazi generals and none of his own."

Martin cowered and made a strategic withdrawal towards the opening, to draw the patriot from the carving knife.

"Look at de state of him! Knows all de Nazi generals!"

Despising himself again for a coward, Martin wondered what

Janet or his mother would think if they could see him now; but there was a lot to be said for discretion, nevertheless.

Hearing the commotion and quite logically connecting it with his dinner, the guardsman moved towards it, craning his neck. Unfortunately he managed to get in between what he considered to be a helpful corporal and the master-gippo, and drew the latter's fire.

"What do *you* want, den? Stand to attention! Did you know you had to send for all your generals to County Cork?"

Momentarily taken aback, the guardsman gave ground, but soon recovered. With the pangs of hunger gnawing at his guts, such digressions were only exasperating. Throwing discretion to the winds, he glared at the one who had only to lift a finger to alleviate his hunger.

"So that's it, Sergeant? Thanks. I just fluffed why we're so long in winning the war, with all these flaming Irishmen knocking around."

As the master-gippo collected himself to demolish the guardsman, Martin stealthily withdrew to the mess-room and then fled to the Naafi. He had bungled things badly. Another minute, he knew, and he would have been escorting an indignant guardsman to the place so aptly called the cooler.

## CHAPTER XIV

CONGRATULATING himself on his escape, he went towards the Naafi. There were several things he should be doing, but most urgently he needed cigarettes. Blancoing and polishing could always be put off for an hour or two, though he would rather get it done before parade in order to be free from such annoyances to-night; but his nerves required an immediate tonic. He still had one coupon and at least enough money for a packet of cigarettes and a cup of tea. It was a quarter-past one, half an hour yet to parade—an ordeal he contemplated with alarm. But beyond that, in only about four hours' time, there would be Janet. He pictured himself meeting her there at the gate, seeing her again after all these dreary days—oh, roll on, roll on. Why did he let these things trouble him when he had that to look forward to?

She would know how to comfort him. She would compensate for everything. He must try to keep his thoughts on that.

But no sooner had he made the resolve than he recollected something else which brought him to an abrupt halt. What on earth was he doing? Where did he think he was going? The guardsmen's Naafi was denied him for ever. From now on he must brave that lair of the gods, the corporals' Naafi. He had completely forgotten.

For some moments he remained where he was in a state of indecision. What was he to do? Where was he to go? He saw himself as homeless, an outcast, lost between two worlds—the old friendly world he had forfeited, and the new world to which, he told himself, he did not and never could belong. The two worlds were mutually exclusive and hostile. As a corporal now he was debarred from fraternising with guardsmen. He might not drink with them in their Naafi or in public-houses, nor walk down the road with them, nor even ask one of them for a light. Familiarity of this sort was the worst crime a corporal could commit; it was regarded as undermining the discipline of the British Army, and was immediately punished with C.O.'s Orders and being stripped. How was it possible, in such circumstances, to be the kind of N.C.O. he wished to be, different from the others, taking an interest in the men and winning their confidences and respect? Democracy, indeed! If we were fighting for democracy, one would never guess it in the Guards, where every semblance of it was viewed with horror and resisted with the utmost vigour.

A wave of irritation and anger surged up in him. Suppose he persisted in taking his custom to the guardsmen's Naafi, stood up to all this tyranny and had his say? But the rebellious feeling died away as soon as it arose. Well, he couldn't stand there for ever. How was he to get the fags he was dying for?

A brain-wave struck him. Avoiding all Naafis, might he not get hold of a guardsman and ask him to go and buy them for him? But for the first time in his memory the place was deserted. There seemed nothing for it but the corporals' Naafi. Perhaps there wouldn't be many corporals in it just now. He might just dash in, get what he wanted, and dash out. But while he was considering the idea, he heard the sound of footsteps approaching, and saw Corporal Abernethy bearing down upon him.

"Hello there. Doing all right? Coming in for a tea? I just passed the Jerk with a Fanny. He's a terrible man for the women."

Relieved to have his mind made up for him and a protector into the bargain, Martin fell into step beside him.

"Hello there. Doing all right eh? You horrible detail, Sheriff! Always strolling around like an old farmer; setting a bad example to the guardsmen."

In this manner, Corporal Abernethy greeted his colleagues at the tables as he entered the Naafi and passed down to the counter. He appeared to know everybody, and it was obvious by the way the different groups paused to hurl abuse at him that he had considerable influence in his circle.

"You idle hound, Abernethy! Hollow your back. Stick your chin in! Stand still, right or wrong!"

"Hello there, Waxy. You're a terrible man for the tea. Feeling all right, eh, after the chasing you got on the slope this morning?"

Waxy grinned. He was on a corporals' course, an ordeal all new corporals had to endure, and had found it necessary to change his shirt after the gruelling the Hound had given him that morning on the drill parade. It was called the "slope" because the command, "Slope arms," featured in it so often.

Drill was the common measure. It might be a good thing to be able to hit a target at five hundred yards, but to drill like a guardsman was infinitely better; and the higher the rank, the higher the standard of drill required, unless one entered by the back door with a commission, in which case it was permissible to flop around anyhow. For the first three months at the Guards' Depot in London one was contemptuously regarded as a rookie, but comfort was to be found in the knowledge that each drill brought one nearer that ultimate perfection demanded of guardsmen and particularly of trained soldiers. Three or four drills a day for twelve weeks was the minimum considered necessary to bring about this important result; then the commandant's inspection took place. It followed that to lift one out of the rut of guardsmen, to become a qualified corporal, to approach the almost automatic precision of a Catcham or a Jerk, nothing short of three more months of acrobatics and physical torture were needed.

"Queer hawk, Waxy," said Corporal Abernethy, turning confidentially to Martin. "No time at all for the drills."

Wondering what was queer about that, Martin followed him self-consciously to the counter. He felt like a new member of some secret society: perhaps there would be some unpleasant form of initiation, such as being thrown through the window, or compelled to stand on one's hands and drink a cup of tea. But although this was the first time his feet had ever trodden these sacred boards, everyone seemed unaware of or indifferent to the epoch-making event, and his entrance occasioned no more than a few cursory glances.

"Terrible man, Waxy," went on Corporal Abernethy. "He's a shark with the arrows, though. Can you play darts?"

Feeling that it would be better to pretend he could, but preparing a suitable excuse in case he was called upon to do so, Martin nodded.

The Naafi girl was not at all impressed by mixing with so many corporals. Having taken Corporal Abernethy's order, she regarded Martin with cold, impersonal enquiry.

"A tea and ten Woodbines—oh, and a tin of polish—bluebell."

She looked at him in surprise. As she turned to get it, Corporal Abernethy touched his arm.

"You don't have to, you know; unless you've so much money you don't know what to do with it all."

He turned to Waxy, who had come up for another tea: "A bloke here buying a tin of bluebell!"

Waxy looked incredulous.

"Let's see, the last time I bought one was in '41. Are there no guardsmen in your room, then? Of course you're a new corporal, aren't you?" he said, as if it explained everything. "Just ask one of the lads to give you a dip—or better still, get him to give your buttons a rub."

It was a new thought to Martin. He saw that he had been guilty of a breach of etiquette.

The Naafi girl brought his order.

"I suppose that's necessary," said Corporal Abernethy, as Martin opened his Woodbines and offered him one. "It's not so bad at the beginning of the week, but by the time it gets round to pay-day there aren't so many cigarettes flying round the barrack-room."

Seen now from this side, Martin understood that the constant



borrowings, spongings and scroungings that guardsmen put up with from N.C.O.s. were not at all the casual business they had seemed, but a calculated general economic policy, a kind of campaign. It was clear that if guardsmen regarded corporals as a tiresome but unavoidable plague, like mosquitoes in the tropics, corporals regarded guardsmen primarily as a source of supply.

Drinking tea and gossiping, they gathered round a table, Martin trying to look easy and knowing, as though used to corporals' talk. For quite a time the conversation revolved round battalion personalities with hard necks, and the amount of service each had in, Martin diplomatically agreeing with everything his companions said. He gathered that an N.C.O.'s prestige was not necessarily reckoned from the number of stripes he bore. It was strongly influenced by the number of years he had loyally served the colours. It might well be that a sergeant of two years' standing was less important than a corporal of five—except to rookies who accepted such matters superficially. Martin felt very junior.

The Jerk's name was freely mentioned, not with the lurid imprecations or bated breath of guardsmen, but rather like the lower middle classes speaking with studied carelessness of their associations with the great.

"Pooley will get a dust to-morrow at C.O.'s."

Heads drew closer as the one under discussion entered. Ladies in drawing-rooms might have been saying: "My dear! Have you heard? They say . . ."

"Familiarity. The Jerk got him."

Silence fell upon the table as each absorbed this sensation.

"Hello there, Pooley," greeted Corporal Abernethy. "Doing all right?"

They passed on to other things, generously including Martin in the conversation like a colleague of long standing. Indeed, he felt he was accepted implicitly, almost gladly; no doubt because he provided them with a fresh audience for their conceits, and perhaps because they saw in him an addition to their limited ranks which kept guardsmen at bay. But, though flattered, the new member was far from easy in his mind. He perceived that they all "bobbed," bluffed their way, as Gelda said; they were the shadow and not the substance. Whilst, at one moment they spoke of the Jerk with pretentious familiarity, at the next they

exposed their fear and dislike of him, whispering how some corporal had incurred his displeasure by having an untidy kit at room inspection or a dirty cap badge on parade; sympathy for the victim, however, was always noticeable for its absence; they were only frightened for themselves.

They criticised each other's turn-out on the square like women discussing dresses, and Martin was reminded of professional mannequins vying with each other at a dress parade. The Piggery seemed very remote.

"It'll be taking you for waiting," said Waxy thoughtfully.

Corporal Abernethy grimaced.

"It's a pig of a company to do waiting for is Number Three. By the time you've done sick parade, drawn the post, attended Company Orders, Adjo's and C.O.'s, chased after blokes all over the barracks, you don't know whether you're coming or going. And in our company you have to go on all parades besides." He lowered his voice. "A terrible man for spying round is the Jerk, the long-bodied bitch. He caught me skiving battalion parade one morning and got me done stupid at Company Orders. Got me a dig."

"Roll on."

"Wrap up."

They all became reminiscent of the pitfalls of past "waitings."

"What's a dig," Martin asked diffidently, thinking it best to know the worst.

Waxy looked pained at such ignorance, while Corporal Abernethy explained, not unkindly: "You'll soon know. Loss of privileges is a nuisance when you've got to see a Judy—or if you sleep out."

Martin saw himself permanently deprived of privileges, and Janet as far away as ever.

They both gave examples of "digs."

"It'll take him for the corporals' course," went on Waxy sadly.

"Christ, am I glad mine's nearly finished! My second one, too."

"Why, is it hard?"

Waxy whistled.

"They used to say, 'As hard as a rock.' Now they say, 'As hard as a corporal's course.'"

"Dog-rough," interjected a corporal in a group nearby who had been listening to the conversation. "Worse than the Foreign

Legion. I was on my knees the first two weeks; after that I was nearly on my back. And talk about shouting! You have to drill the squad yourself, you know. I've just recovered my voice after two months. My throat was in ribbons. All I could get the second week was a squeak. But keep the eye down; you get it cushy at times."

"You'll get there all right," said one of his companions hopefully.

"I liked the scheme best," said a third. "We done eighty miles in four days and fought a campaign on the way back. It was dead on that."

Martin glanced at the speaker's muscles, bulging even through his thick battle-dress, and became a prey to the gloomiest forebodings. He had always supposed that a corporal's life was easier than that of a guardsman, but he realised now that he had never really given the matter much thought, let alone attempted to see it from the corporal's point of view. What a fool he had been to let himself in for all this!

During the next five minutes all contributed personal experiences of the corporals' courses they had survived, with details of excruciating agonies of endurance. And even then they had not finished.

"I'll be taking him for guard, too," said Waxy dolefully.

Corporal Abernethy was delighted with this idea.

"I'm all for bags of corporals. Every new one makes it a day longer between guards."

"Never took you to do a Jimmies," said one whose arm bore two good conduct stripes, referring to St. James's Palace.

"I ain't the only one," retorted the corporal addressed.

"Oh no," said the first. "I was doing Jimmies when you were only an idea."

"Yeah, a twinkle in your father's eye," said another.

"It's dog-rough on barrack guard just the same," remarked Corporal Abernethy. "Takes you to bob on the brasses. I lost my name badly last time. It's easier to lose the name on guard than slipping on ice."

"Roll on the day," quoted another, "when the Lord will say: 'Stand fast the Regulars and those paying drills. Remainder, dis—miss.'"

"You're with Catcham, aren't you?" Abernethy asked Martin with sudden sympathy. "A desperate type. Makes you do all the work, marching the squads and that."

"Jasus! You can lose your name quicker for marching a squad idly in this dump than anywhere I know," came from an adjacent table.

"Keep the eye down on Catcham!" added Abernethy. "Bad type. You'll see, he'll have you marching them this afternoon."

"Roll on."

"Wrap up."

After more cynicism, one of them looked at his watch and said: "Let's go."

Martin followed to the door those who would now make up his world. To think that he had forsaken the Piggery for this. If only the war would end quickly before it took him for waiting and guard and the purgatory of three more months of solid drill and marching squads.

## CHAPTER XV

"CORPORAL ROULE! Corporal Roule!"

It was the portly figure of Sergeant Swingham, returning from the Sergeants' Mess and carrying the books in the crook of his arm, whom Martin encountered near the Naafi.

"This waiting!" he lamented to himself. "Chasing about after everybody from morning to night. Oh, you're there, are you?" he muttered to Martin, who had hurried up and fallen into step beside him. "These guardsmen! You want eyes in the back of your head! I detailed one to scrub my bunk out for the C.O.'s inspection. I was marking time on him for nearly an hour, and then I had to go chasing after somebody else. My hat! You should see the state of it! These guardsmen! Oh, yes; I believe there's a telegram for you somewhere. Now where did I put it? You can't leave a thing lying about."

Another telegram? Martin was at once perturbed. Was Janet letting him down? Had she changed her mind and gone back home? He suddenly felt he couldn't face another day without seeing her.

"Now, where did I put it? Hold these confounded books a

moment will you, while I have a deco. These guardsmen! They'd rob Jesus Christ of His shoe-strings."

After a flustered search of his tight, grease-stained battle-dress, he suddenly grabbed back the books and began to look through them suspiciously.

"I've just fluffed. It's in the N.C.O.'s report book. By the way, you'll be marking time in front of the woodwork to-morrow at Adjutant's. The Jerk's put you in the report for being idle at C.O.'s Orders."

"Oh, yes," said Martin dully.

One more calamity made little difference. In any case, to-morrow was too remote to visualise. With trembling hands, he took the telegram and tore it open.

"Am at Euston. Expect me 5 p.m. Please meet darling. Love. JANET."

With a sigh of relief, he put it in his pocket, and when he looked up again at the scene about him, these wooden structures, these gravel paths, in which he had moved and lived for so long, it seemed to him that he had never noticed before how extraordinary, how dingy and drab it all was. Even now, at this very minute, she was on her way to him.

"Hello, Syph!" called a sergeant to Martin's companion as he passed. "Doing all right?"

In his mess the sergeant-in-waiting answered to the name of Syph Swingham, owing to a "packet" of syphilis he had contracted when serving in the regiment years ago in the Middle East. Nearly every old soldier had at some time or other received a similar "packet".

"Near enough," he growled. "These corporals!" He went on to Martin. "They're always letting you down. You can't rely upon anybody in this place. There's Corporal Abernethy now going off on ten days' maternity leave. I don't know! It takes you for a casual day."

"What—a casual day's waiting?"

"What else could it be, then?"

"But—but——"

A word, and all his joy of a moment ago, all his anticipations and plans, were in ruins. A casual day's waiting meant that he

was confined to barracks until to-morrow morning. His wife would arrive, and he would not be able to see her. She would have to set about finding lodgings for herself. For a moment the buildings and the gravel paths swam before his eyes; but as quickly the moment passed, and he was surprised how little emotion he felt. Only a kind of dull hatred and resentment took him. He ought to have known. He ought to have thought. He had seen these eleventh-hour disappointments happen often enough to others. They were a daily occurrence. He was a mere number now, no more. They were all numbers, at the mercy of the machine. Herded about like beasts, with no claim to privacy and their every action subject to official scrutiny—they were no longer recognised as having hearts and feelings, private lives, personal wishes; they had no right to plan.

"Look at the state of it!" Sergeant Swingham was saying with disgust, glancing round his bunk. "It's in bad order. It's in gippo. There's no doubt about some people."

To Martin's heavy gaze it seemed in exceptionally good order, except for the desk, which was littered with papers and official-looking books and pamphlets.

"These guardsmen! You'll have to do Evening Orders for me this afternoon. I've got to attend a conference about the scheme next week. Just a minute. I'll make the daily detail out for you."

One thing after another! "But I don't know the first thing about it," said Martin in alarm.

"Well, you'd better learn, then. There's nothing to it at all. It's a piece of cake. All you got to do is stand there with the books."

Martin was not in the least reassured. He knew from experience this trick of over-simplifying one's duties for the benefit of reluctant substitutes.

"Now here's the daily detail. All you do is to get it initialled by the acting drill-bloke. If he wants any names for anything—like checking up on the list of blokes for dental treatment—look at the nominal roll. Oh, and while you're down there you might have a look at the duty book to see what we have to find to-morrow. Yes, then there's week-end passes. These guardsmen! The only time you can find anybody in this company is on Saturday afternoon, when they're collecting passes. Tell everybody the passes have to be in by roll-call to-night. Week-end passes! That's

all they ever think of, and every other one's made out to the Y.M.C.A., Croydon. One of these days somebody'll fluff to them."

His insinuations were not without foundation. Restless creatures, guardsmen took every opportunity of escaping from barracks, particularly at week-ends, when they went in search of stimulation and excitement to London's public-houses and dens of iniquity. Innumerable though these are, it would be difficult to find a single public-house in the whole of the capital on a Saturday night without its guardsman.

Croydon was the official boundary for all ranks, and the Y.M.C.A. there, famous throughout the lower military circles of the Southern Command, was therefore generally recognised as a highly convenient destination to have one's pass made out to. Had Croydon contained a score of branches of that institution, there would still have been insufficient accommodation for the bearers of the shoals of passes made out in its name. No wonder, then, one might argue, that so many pass-bearers moved further on in search of lodgings—even as far as Liverpool or Manchester.

"Here's the nominal roll, Corporal."

Sergeants-in-waiting held three books; one, the guardsman's report book, another serving the same purpose for N.C.Os., and, lastly, a book containing records and information essential to the smooth functioning of the company. They were all more sacred than Bibles, and the last, with its pages covered with lists of names, almost as mysterious.

"Let me see, I haven't made the tattoo slip. How many absentees have we? Still, I don't need it till roll-call."

Not the least important duty of the sergeants-in-waiting was to call the roll. Before doing this, it was necessary for them to parade with their corporals on the tiny square where C.O.'s Orders formed up. There they did an elaborate "fall in," had their own roll called by the drill sergeant—the army worked ponderously and distrustfully through an elaborate system of checking—and were then dismissed to return to their companies, where they marched round the barrack-rooms calling upon any man who had lost his privileges to stand by his bed and answer his name.

Privileges were cancelled automatically for a fixed period after a spell of C.B., at the end of which an application had to be made to the company commander for their return. Deprived of them,

a man had to be in barracks not later than tattoo—10 p.m.—and forfeited the right to week-end passes and privilege leave; in the ordinary way, unless on duty, one was allowed out until midnight. An advantage of being an N.C.O. was that punishment for petty offences could not be awarded in the form of pack-drills and C.B., but only in loss of privileges, or "digs."

Having called the roll, the sergeants-in-waiting then returned to the Hound's office with an important slip of paper called the "tattoo slip" which showed the names of men on sleeping-out leave on one side, and those of absentees on the other. The names of absentees appeared for eight days, afterwards to pass from the public gaze unless the elaborate machinery for tracking them down succeeded in bringing them back to be confined to the guard-room. In this manner, the Hound always knew who was out of barracks all night; from a morning report submitted by the sergeant of the guard to the C.O., he also knew who returned the next day. Thus a reliable check was perpetually kept on the floating population of the barracks.

"Sergeant Swingham! Sergeant Swingham!"

"Blast! There it goes again! I don't believe the Jerk knows any other name but mine."

A moment later he returned.

"If it's not one thing it's another," he grumbled, looking sideways at his face in the mirror as he talked to Martin. "Joe Soap, that's me. Do this, do that; find this, find that. Everybody's bobbing like fury on the C.O. being at the conference. These warrant officers, so called! I won't be available for duty-mounting to-night. It'll take you instead of me."

"Duty-mounting!" echoed Martin, horrified.

"That's all right, Corporal. Don't get excited. I was doing it at Buckingham Palace when you were a little boy. There's nothing in it. It's dead on."

Martin had formed up for duty-mounting on the square more times than he cared to remember, but he had been too intent upon executing his own small part to the satisfaction of the drill-sergeant to have any idea what the sergeants-in-waiting did, except that they lined up somewhere in the rear and put everybody in the book as the drill-sergeant roared out their names. He recalled, however, with the deepest alarm he had yet felt that



they took it in turns to drill the punishment parade, which formed up with the guard, for an hour after the duties had marched off.

This was really too much. Though he had hitherto been stunned almost into insensibility by the repeated blows that had befallen him in such a short space of time, he was now seized with a darting panic. They had no right to put all this load on him. Somehow, he must wriggle out. He must do something. He must see someone . . . the Jerk . . . the Hound. . . . He would sooner go absent and lose his stripes than . . .

"Corporal Roule! Corporal Roule!" Sergeant Catcham bounced into the room, and took in the situation at a glance.

"I fluffed you'd be here. It takes the corporal for a casual day, does it? Right. You don't want him for ten minutes or so, do you?" he enquired of Sergeant Swingham, glancing with understanding at the books in Martin's hands as one sergeant to another.

Sergeant Swingham shook his head warily.

"Right. You can spare him to look after the squad while I see the C.S.M. about this conference."

## CHAPTER XVI

"**R**IGHT, Corporal Roule! Get them outside," said Sergeant Catcham briskly.

Speechless, Martin stared at him, his eyes full of mute appeal. Here was the dreaded moment.

"Well? What is it? It's time they were out already. The officer will be down at the lecture room at five to two. March them down. Well? What is it?"

"Oh, nothing," stammered Martin.

"Right. I'm just going to the stores. I'll be back in two minutes. I want to see everybody on parade by the time I'm back. If anybody's missing it, put him in the book."

Martin remembered how he had once stood in front of a dentist's door, toying with the knocker, thinking it the worst moment of his life. Oh happy days! How sheltered he was then! He entered the barrack-room. Two rows of sprawling bodies met his gaze, as he knew they would; two rows of carefree guardsmen resting serenely in the knowledge that others bore the responsibility and they only waited. A band bellowed on the radio.

Martin coughed nervously, though only he heard it, and only because he was expecting it. He braced himself.

"Come on. Get outside!"

Pale with anxiety, he awaited the result.

There was a slight stirring; a few heads turned curiously; that was all.

"Get outside," he repeated uncertainly.

Gelda opened one eye.

"Why?" he asked.

It was a simple question, but it put Martin completely off his stroke.

"Because it's time for parade."

As soon as he had spoken he saw his mistake. To descend to argument was hopelessly weak to begin with, and in any case what did Gelda care about the time? After two years of bullying and regimentation, one might as well talk Euclid to a mule as appeal to Gelda's logic, for he now responded to nothing less forceful than vocal dynamite.

Martin tried again.

His voice vibrated, but with nervousness, not authority.

Gelda opened his other eye to focus both with interest upon the new corporal. Then he sniggered, and Martin knew the worst had happened.

"He's only warm, like. Eh, Nobby, you big idle swiller! The corp's here bumming the load, telling you to get outside."

"Not me. It ain't time for parade yet," he muttered, annoyed at being aroused from his doze. "It's only just abart five minutes since we got down to lapping it up. Who? Him?"

One by one, the sleeping dogs stirred, growled, then sniffed as if at an objectionable smell. It was a crisis; the next moment they would either get up and slouch out, or ignore him for ever and ever. It was the critical moment.

"Well, chase me round the room with a long scrubber," said Dolly, sitting up. "We're after being blitzed."

Yawning, Nobby turned over.

"I say," said the Bishop, blinking; "you're terribly hard on us. It might soften the blow if you said 'please.' We guardsmen have our pride."

It was failure: with the whole might of the British military

machine behind him, they knew him for what he was, a masquerader.

"You aren't expecting us to be after getting on parade after a lousy dinner like we got that time. And when we've sweated all afternoon, be Jasus, all we'll be getting for tea is a widow's memory—a miserable swank."

To cover his confusion, Martin hurried down to his locker to get his cap; he had a forlorn hope that some supernatural agency might intervene to aid him. But the only agency that would be coming to his assistance, he knew—and all too soon at that—was Sergeant Catcham, who would be charging in, livid with rage, at any moment now, and turning him inside out before the whole squad. If he could only get one or two of them moving and thereby induce a dribble towards the door, the remainder would follow like sheep.

Had he not one friend, one ally in the Piggery, now that Gelda had deserted him? His gaze fell on Hooper, who wielded considerable influence, and who was at least tolerant in his indolent way. Martin addressed a new attempt to him.

"Time to get outside. Come on."

Glancing about and seeing everyone else still recumbent, Hooper debated the question with himself; it was against all his principles to be on parade a moment earlier than was absolutely necessary.

"Don't bob so much. We'll git theer," he said patiently, closing his eyes again.

Standing there among them, ineffectual and helpless, Martin suddenly hated all these faces that were either openly or covertly watching him, testing him, provoking him.

"I don't care how long you lie on your beds. It's just the same to me, if you all want to lose your names. I can tell you I won't get excited about that. Sergeant Catcham will be back in less than a minute, so you'd better watch out."

"It'll be a change, anyway, to lose the name."

Gelda looked speculative.

"I wonder what they'll call us when we've lost the names?" he said.

A roar, the only language they understood, came from the back of the Spider. Martin saw them stiffen; and reflected bitterly

that the power to create such a jungle noise was the primary qualification of a successful N.C.O. Though now on the same side as the voice, commander rather than commanded, he himself was instinctively tautened by it.

"It takes us. Get a heave on your big idle bodies. I'd be all for the corporal lining you up outside and doubling you down to the cooler."

The speaker was Snags. With a glance of sympathy at Martin, he got up and, calling upon Nobby and Dolly to fluff to themselves, led the way to the door.

A tremendous feeling of relief passed over Martin, not unmixed with surprise and curiosity. It was not the first time Snags had intervened on his behalf to save a nasty situation, and Martin only wished he had remembered this earlier. But what could his motive be? Since his own ambitions had been frustrated, it would have been more understandable, Martin felt, if instead of being helpful, Snags had found a kind of spiteful satisfaction in the spectacle of his discomfiture. The answer, no doubt, was that Snags was naturally regimental-minded, a born disciplinarian and leader, obedient, loyal; it would be against his nature to stand passively by and see insubordination going on; his every instinct, his every sympathy would always be with authority. He was the N.C.O.'s dream of a guardsman. One day, no doubt, he would be the guardsman's nightmare of an N.C.O.

Martin had never liked him; his careerism was altogether too blatant, and there was something contemptible about the way he crawled round sergeant's bunks, offering to blanco their belts. But Martin recognised his indebtedness to him—and any friend was acceptable now. If he could only manage to enlist two or three more on his side, he would have put the famous "Divide and rule" maxim into practice, and the Pigs would soon cave in. Yet even in the midst of these calculations, a slight uneasiness took him. Two stripes certainly made a difference to his sense of values. Was the rot already setting in? Only yesterday rebels like Gelda and Dolly had been his examples to imitate; now he was devising ways of breaking them in. Yesterday they had been his friends; now he was pleased to welcome a rat like Snags who facilitated their subjugation. Well, it was entirely their own fault, anyway; he had to do his duty, and they weren't giving

him a chance. They deserved whatever might be coming to them; but as soon as they behaved and he had them under control, he would put his good intentions into practice, and show them that it was quite possible to be a corporal without being a bastard.

"Tee-hee, the corporal. Can I do you now, corporal?"

But for all their sarcasm, the betrayal of one member had done much to demoralise them. They wavered; the solid wall of opposition began to crumble.

"There's no doubt about him," cried Dolly, disgusted. "In Civvy Street I was always after being told the biggest enemy of the working man was the working man, but, be Jasus, I hadn't been in the army then."

All eyes turned to Hoofer, as though to a final court of appeal; but, apparently realising at last that this was an exceptional circumstance calling for exceptional action, he rolled off the bed to follow Snags.

"The name's Croft, not Soft," he said, rather haughtily.

"Hello," retorted Nobby. "One of the nice people."

As the trickle of guardsmen became a flow, and presently a rush, Martin breathed freely once more. The mutiny was broken.

"Right," growled Sergeant Catcham.

It was a foreboding word always preceding something unpleasant. Martin trembled in anticipation.

"Put Grey and Bishop in the report—a minute late on parade. Have them at Company Orders. Got that?"

"I didn't think, Sergeant——" began Dolly.

"Shut up! You aren't paid to think. Put Grey in the report again. Slovenly dressed. His left breast pocket button undone."

"Sergeant."

Martin fumbled in his pockets and wrote the names on a slip of paper to hand to the sergeant-in-waiting, who would insert them in the book. Another ordeal, giving evidence!

## CHAPTER XVII

"**F**ALL in! Fall out again! You haven't moved. You're all asleep. I'll get you a drill. I'll get you two drills. Get a move on yourselves or you'll all have steaming shirts! I'm telling you for nothing. Remember you're in the Brigade of Guards. A shower

of cripples in the Home Guard would show you up. Yes, Saturday-afternoon soldiers. Remember you're the cream of the army."

"Turned sour," muttered Gelda.

"Right! Get fell in sharp."

Martin stood on one awkward leg in front of the squad. Accustomed to hiding unobtrusively in the centre rank, he felt painfully conspicuous. Enviously he glanced at Sergeant Catcham standing there with such absolute assurance.

"Carry on, Corporal. Call them up and get leave of the officer to march them off and take them down to the lecture-room."

Pale with apprehension, Martin faced round towards the squad. Though the future might take him through walls of fire and rivers of blood, nothing would ever erase the memory of this terrible moment. Among the watchful eyes boring into him, he caught the Bishop's, which winked knowingly.

"Squad!"

He was ordinarily a quiet speaker, and had never had occasion to test his lung-power before. Lying there unsuspected all this time, it now burst out in what seemed to him like a clap of thunder, startling him out of his wits. The squad appeared to have a similar opinion, for it stiffened perceptibly.

Perhaps he had overrated the Jerk? But alas! no.

"Asyouwerrrrrr! Stand easy! Open your mouth, Corporal! Shout! Shout! Shout! You wouldn't be heard from behind the back of a newspaper."

It was the Jerk himself, whom Martin, to his consternation, now saw leaning over a rail on the verandah of the company office, talking to Perky. Nor was this all. A considerable audience had suddenly sprung from nowhere. Storemen and company clerks had appeared to stare with the interest of small boys at a circus; a group of sergeants looked on in amusement; the Hound, riding by on a bicycle, dismounted to twirl his moustache; while a party of guardsmen under Pilot-Officer Hanks, as Gelda called him, who had been engaged in a barrack sweep, leaned indolently on their brooms. Taking all this in a glance, it seemed to the young corporal that the entire battalion had turned out to witness his humiliation. That moment, suspended between the past twenty-eight years of his life and an uncertain future was an eternity.

"Squad!"

The effort tore his throat, but even in his present state of confusion he noted with satisfaction the difference in the response. The satisfaction was his alone.

"Asyouwerrrrr! Straighten your bodies up sharper! The third man from the right in the front rank standing idle!"

The young corporal gaped stupidly at the front rank. If the whole of the British Army had been facing him he could not have felt more bewildered. It dawned upon him with horror that he was now so confused that he couldn't remember right from left as he faced the squad; their right, of course, being different from his own.

"Well! Well! Well! Don't let them wipe your eye! Take hold of them! They'll be falling down next, lying in the gutter and going to sleep."

"Hoofe," he called. "Idle——"

"Not a word about it. Right, I said. The army right."

Martin counted three from the other end: "Smith—standing idle on parade!"

"Yes. Have him at Company Orders to-morrow! Don't forget now! Go on! Go on! Go on!"

"Squad!"

Half a minute now elapsed without interruption; and having marched up to Perky, halted and saluted, without more than a baleful glance from the C.S.M., Martin felt he was getting somewhere at last.

"May I have leave to march the squad off, sir, please?"

In the ordinary way, Perky would have assented, but before he could do so the Jerk intervened:

"Can't hear you. Shout as if you meant it! This isn't a morgue."

It was ridiculous. Only three yards separated them. If he had only whispered, the Jerk would have heard easily.

"May I have the leave to march the squad off, sir, please?" he bellowed, losing his temper.

"That's better," nodded the Jerk. "That's what I want in future."

"Oh, yes, please," replied Perky, taking his cue and flicking his hand.

To close the incident, Martin saluted again, wondering if there was any basic difference between military customs and the mumbo-

jumbo of savages prostrating themselves before their tribal gods.

The next part of the ritual was to turn about, a drill movement that involved describing an arc of a hundred and eighty degrees on the right heel and left toe, needing a perfect sense of balance.

"As you werrrrr!" growled the Jerk, outraged. "Show the pause! I want you to move like greased lightning. I want you to move so fast I can't even see you. Keep your arms pressed against your side, count a pause of tup-three, move on the one. Don't flop around here! About turn! One- tup, three- one- tup, three- one- left, right, left, right, left, right. Get in quick time! Swing your arms straight from front to rear!"

Perspiring from effort and suppressed rage, Martin took up his position again in front of the squad. Anything but violent by nature, nothing would have given him greater pleasure now than to get his hands round that bulging neck, and squeeze the life out of it. If they had taught him and his thousands of comrades to hate fascism as intensely as they had taught them to hate their superiors, the war would have been won long ago. Beyond caring now what happened, he mustered what was left of his voice.

"Squa-d—Shun!" he roared through a lacerated throat.

Twenty heels shot through the air to crash down simultaneously against twenty others.

"As you were!"

Anticipating the Jerk by a split second, he shot a malicious glance in his direction. He had seen nothing wrong with the squad's movement, which, in his opinion, had been brilliantly performed, but it would be contrary to centuries of tradition to permit anything, however perfect, to pass without rebuke. That was the secret of the unrivalled standard of the Brigade of Guards. If nobody made a mistake, N.C.Os. resorted to blackguarding.

"Put your foot down—Bishop! Pick it up six inches and bang your heel down hard! You won't crack the tarmac. And if you do, you won't have to pay for it."

A part of himself he had never before suspected of existing rose up and asserted itself. If the feelings he was now possessed by—all the world his enemy, hating indiscriminately, hating professionally—were not the natural feelings of a C.S.M., at any rate he began to behave in the same way. No doubt it was to arouse such feelings that they insulted him, goaded him. Their only



purpose was to create a mass of robots drilled to a turn, super-smart for ceremonial parades, and they resented the fact that the war interfered with this process, intruded with weapon-training and all the other things a fighting man had to know, eating more and more into the time that would have been much better employed on the square. Drill! Drill! And since abuse, humiliation, terrorism produced slicker drill than any other method, every trick was resorted to and every effort made to foster and develop the sadistic impulse of those in charge.

A favourite method of adding to a squad's discomfort and also to the daily list for Company Orders was to call the men to attention and keep them stiff and mute like stone images until the position became torture to them. Inevitably they began to sway, and this was quite as grave an offence as being idle on parade, and carried at least one extra drill. Padi often went into a frenzied tirade, at his Orders, against some guardsman who could not stand absolutely still for some impossible length of time; though if he himself had been called upon to stand still for only two minutes, he would have begun to exhibit the symptoms of St. Vitus's dance.

It was a trick Martin now resorted to.

"Stop swaying," he hissed. "You're like a bunch of poplar trees in a gale. Grey—moving about on parade!"

He began taking names recklessly. He might as well have the whole squad at Company Orders, he thought savagely. Nothing mattered now; and as the rage consuming him could not be vented upon its instigators, the innocent would have to suffer. But he hoped his victims appreciated that every name he took was a substitute for the Jerk's, every snarl escaping him a commuted grunt of satisfaction at squeezing a bulging neck.

But he had a good reason for keeping the men at attention: he did not know what to do next; and after he had taken every name he could think of the problem was no nearer solution, and the pause became awkward, embarrassing. That the squad saw through the barrage he was putting up, he had little doubt. There was a gleam of derision in Gelda's eye, as much as to say: "Gammin' on squad instructor, eh? Think you're taking hold of us, eh? Well, I've fluffed to you all right, trying to bluff the way there. Never took you to drill a squad before, did it? You don't even know which ruddy way to turn us, like, so you're playing for time."

And that was the truth. His sense of right and left had temporarily deserted him.

Hoofer screwed up his mouth.

"It's gerrin' on my tits, this is," he muttered from that side of it away from Martin.

"I'm all for the nice corporals," jeered Nobby.

"Same as that," whispered another. "Big words from little men."

"We suffer for the cause," muttered the Bishop, introducing a patriotic note.

"Bishop—talking on parade!" snapped Martin, again anticipating the Jerk.

"Up you," retorted the Bishop, impolitely for him.

"Gelda—laughing on parade!"

The problem was to turn the squad towards the lecture hut. Martin plunged.

"Squad will move to the left"—but *was* it left?—"Ri—left—turn!"

The result was chaos. Partly because of the indecision in his command and voice, partly because many knew which way they ought to be going, some turned right, others left, others about, while many simply stood still. Gelda, who only wanted the slightest excuse to be perverse, made a right incline. Martin gaped. A scientific experimenter accidentally stumbling upon something new to unleash terrible and hitherto unknown forces could not have been more appalled. It looked like mutiny. He glanced helplessly from the squad to the Jerk.

"As you wererrrrrr! For God's sake take hold of them! They'll be running away next. Hoofer's half-way to the Naafi already."

"Wake up, you dozy men!" cried Martin feebly, lost in the Jerk's thunder. "Stand to attention! Squad will move to the right, right—turn!"

At last the miracle had happened. He had them in the right direction. But, seeing the Jerk's lips about to form the dreaded phrase again, he cut in hastily to a bewildered guardsman who was a split second later than the remainder: "Wake up, man! Wake up, you horrible detail! Next time I'll send you a postcard and then you might be there with the others."

This was a favourite expression of Sergeant Catcham's.

"Quick—march!"

"Halt! Flank, Corporal! Flank! Flank! Flank!"

"By the right——"

"Asyouwererrrrrrr!"

If it wasn't black, it must be white.

"By the left—quick—march! Left, right; left, right; left, right; left, right."

He had launched into calling out the time in complete ignorance of the skill it required. To hear the Jerk's smoothness and rhythm as he called it was enough to convince any young corporal of his own ability to do the same. When all were thoroughly out of step, Martin's voice petered out in despair. The squad floundered in confusion.

"Halt!" stormed the Jerk, beside himself. "Halt! Halt! Halt! For the love of St. Patrick, do something man! In a minute they'll be tearing through the main gates. Two minutes, and they'll be half-way to London—get by the left quickly! Come on, now! Hurry! Look at Gelda, Corporal! Who owns him? Does anybody? He's going round like an inmate from a home for waifs and strays. He doesn't know where he is. Set them off again!"

"By the left—quick—march!"

This time Martin thought it safer to let them settle to their own time.

"Reminds me of when I came back off leave that time," said Gelda, less cautious now the Jerk was well out of hearing. "There was a terrible rush for the taxis."

"What are you trying to give me, nar, then?" came Nobby's voice. "Next you'll be telling us you took a Chinese rickshaw."

"Oh, def."

Now that he had got them in motion, Martin's problem was to guide them towards the lecture-room. To reach it, he should have wheeled them to the right at the first opening between the buildings, but he was too late with the appropriate word of command, and the entire squad shot past.

"Give them about turn!" came the Jerk's irritating roar. "Go on! Hurry up! Go on. Before they've all gone absent."

In a flash, Martin's sense of direction returned; he remembered now that he parted his hair on the left side. He also remembered that in quick time the command "About turn" was given as the left foot passed the right.

"Move to the right in threes! About——"

But left feet whizzed past right at a speed to mesmerize him. For the next ten paces, as feet passed feet, he craned his neck, mouth half-open, in anticipation; but no sound came, and it was not until they were well down the road that he managed to get out the word "Turn." But they were now so distant that only half the squad heard it, or at least responded, for he knew them well enough to suspect that some of them had purposely ignored it. Gelda, for instance, he could well imagine saying:

"Lead on! Take no notice! He's pushed!"

While one half returned towards him, therefore, the other continued on its way with an air of sublime innocence—on, on, growing smaller and smaller into the distance.

This was the end. Things had gone too far for him to be able to retrieve the situation. He was done for, and in the face of this major disaster, all the defiant anger that had possessed him a moment ago turned to indifference. They could not shoot him, anyway; though he would not much care if they did. He washed his hands of the whole business.

Soldiers are not paid to think; their duty is to obey. It is a matter for conjecture, therefore, where Gelda's half, which had now almost reached vanishing point, would eventually have arrived if the Jerk had not intervened.

It came like the crack of doom, a magnificent effort. The whole place shook. It must have been heard in the nearest village, which was at least five miles away.

"ABOUT—TURN!"

As if by magic the dot on the horizon obeyed, presently to resume the identity of a squad of men. It was super-remote control. Simultaneously, the other half turned to meet them.

"Halt!" snapped the Jerk, when they had rejoined forces. "Face this way! Come on! Settle down—right, Corporal. See if you can lose them again. Go on! Go on! Go on! Or I'll send for a nursemaid! Set them off again!"

Martin obeyed. When they were level with the opening and almost on top of him he called: "Right wheel!"—but his sense of direction had gone again.

"Left wheel!" he cried in anguish.

"Make up your mind," said the Jerk sarcastically. "They aren't thought-readers, you know."

The relief at passing from the Jerk's view was like being released from the rack. When he had halted the squad on the wrong foot and ushered it into the lecture-room, Martin almost collapsed from nervous exhaustion. The Jerk was bound to put him in the book, he knew, for being idle in charge of a squad; but he was beyond caring about anything now.

## CHAPTER XVIII

"COMPANY ORDERS," Sergeant Catcham told Martin when it was nearly three o'clock. "Slip round and get them outside, and warn those people of yours, too. Don't forget now. These guardsmen. Look at all these names."

Martin went. Now that his recent ordeal was over, now that he was in his senses again and was able to consider calmly his late performance and the figure he had cut, reaction had set in, and he was both ashamed of his treatment of his old friends and dismayed at the approaching consequences of that treatment. To have to go through this absurd ceremony now, this daily climax of a guardsman's life, and give evidence against the Pigs! A nice sort of end to his good intentions of being an exceptional N.C.O. and never booking anyone if he could avoid it. However, regrets were useless. The contemptible affair could not be halted. It would go on inexorably now to its ridiculous conclusion. Sergeant Catcham's charges were down in ink and could not be erased; the Jerk had heard him call the names out, and he was the last man in the world to forget. Martin shrugged. Well, he'd had to do it, hadn't he?—or most of it, anyway. And other N.C.Os. thought nothing of it: at least he had a conscience in the matter. . . .

Besides, the Pigs weren't the only sufferers. What about himself? For the business was further complicated by the two indictments against him, one by the Jerk and the other by Sergeant Catcham. What would he say in his defence to Padi? What could he say? For what was his word against the Jerk's—or Gelda's against his own? There was no justice in the army; discipline took its place, and discipline meant that authority was always right. The whole thing disgusted him. Of the two ordeals, giving evidence against his friends or being in the book himself, he couldn't decide which was the worse. Army life was a grotesque game in

which superiors devoted most of their energies to catching out their juniors.

"Get outside for Company Orders," he called half-heartedly along the passages. "Come on. Get outside!"

How he loathed it! But it had to be done. He must slink into the Piggery to warn his old comrades and face their contemptuous looks.

"Gelda! Bishop! Clarke! Grey! Come on! Outside for Company Orders!"

"Company Orders—me?" demanded Gelda incredulously, aroused into instant hostility. "What for?"

"You know—this afternoon."

"Well, for evermore! Trying to blackguard me, eh? He's only warm, like, ain't he? Putting me in the book? Fall out, will you. Turn to your left and don't salute."

Gelda found it too ludicrous to entertain seriously.

"It's right, I'm telling you," persisted Martin, feeling himself flushing. "Get outside, or you'll be missing it. Same with the others. Come on!"

He did not wait for them to put their indignant thoughts into words, but hurried away.

Soon all those whose names had been taken stood in two lines upon the verandah. The sergeant-in-waiting, or the senior N.C.O., called the assembly up to attention as officers flitted to and fro. Within, Padi, would soon sit enthroned.

The Pigs were well to the front, eyeing Martin with a new and by no means friendly interest. It had no doubt dawned upon them now that the new corporal had to be taken seriously. He saw their lips moving in what he knew to be disparaging asides, and turned away in discomfort. How could a man serve two masters? He'd genuinely wanted and intended to be cushy and the only result was this—with himself in the same boat as them. And why should he take all the blame? It was the fault of the system above all, and after that as much their fault as his. If he had got them into trouble, they had tried to do the same for him. What did they care what happened to him and his sleeping-out pass? It was every man for himself—"Sod you. I'm all right." Anyway, he would give his evidence fairly, by stating truthfully and impartially what had happened, and no more.

He wouldn't rub it in. He'd show them he could do his duty, however exacting, and still be honest with himself.

Narrowed eyes on the alert for misbehaviour on the part of some unsuspecting guardsman, the Jerk emerged from the company office. Automatically, in spite of the earache episode, Martin checked up all his alibis. When the Jerk came near, one had to be prepared to account for every minute of the day.

"Company Orders—shun!"

The Jerk had seen Padi. A silence as impressive as those Whitehall used to know on Armistice Day fell upon the gathering; even the barrack sparrows ceasing to chirrup. Men from different walks of life, labourers, tradesmen, shop assistants, stood like statues; all had come to accept the proceedings as inevitable, natural.

"Carry on, please, Sergeant-major."

A tedious interval followed, during which the Jerk and Padi were locked in secret conference inside the office. The sergeant-major then reappeared to shout vehemently words he had been shouting with tireless monotony for the past five years: "Company Orders—shun! Quick—march! Left, right; left, right. . ."

The evidence filed in behind. The door was closed. Martin knew there was no escape.

"Mark time! Left, right; left, right. . ."

It was a simple wooden hut, made by ordinary workmen; but had any of them imagined as they worked that they were raising the scene of such a solemn and awe-inspiring ritual?

"Pick your knees up! More yet! More yet! More yet! Left, right; left, right. . ."

As anyone with drilling experience knows, one of the best means of getting a squad in quick time, of "chasing them" as it is called, is to keep them marking time. It is a movement which seems to contain some inevitable force of self-acceleration, tends to run away with itself; however slowly it begins, some uncontrollable force impels it ever faster, until legs are working with the rapidity of pistons. It is highly exhausting; not only must feet be picked up until the upper parts of the legs are parallel with the ground, but the rest of the body must remain rigidly to attention, so that not a glimmer of daylight shows between arms and legs, and a penny may be balanced on the head. Acrobats at twenty pounds a week might well learn from this accomplishment something to their

advantage. Guardsmen do it for three shillings a day—and without applause.

"Get a move on your idle bodies, will you!"

At last, when they were all too breathless to speak, let alone defend their names, the order, "Halt!" was given, then: "Right—turn!" This was done as on the square, and the report of iron heels stamping upon the floor shook the hut. It was done with a special zest, for it also shook Padi in his chair.

Presenting the book to Padi, who sat with the remote, impersonal look of God on the Day of Judgment, the Jerk said, with restrained relish and as though his superior were in need of enlightenment: "Ten guardsmen in the report, sir."

As usual, Gelda's brow glistened. A drowsy fly, that had so far survived the rigours of winter, settled upon it. But had Gelda moved a fraction of an inch he would have been in the report again. The Bishop quaked slightly. Dolly, however, was unimpressed; a regular attender at these functions, he had reached a stage of indifference which even a charge of mutiny would scarcely have affected.

At the back, standing among the sergeants, Martin waited apprehensively. He was keyed up, a bundle of nerves. He was no longer thinking how to present his evidence fairly. He had no thoughts at all. He wanted only to survive.

Padi saw the blank, wooden expressions on the faces before him—for who can stand to attention and still look human?—but shrewdly surmised, no doubt, that the agile brains behind were busily engaged in inventing or rehearsing the various "bars" with which guilty guardsmen insult the intelligence of the gods.

"Clarke! wake up, man! Take a pace forward!" snapped the Jerk. Nobby took a smart pace forward.

"Look up, man! Look straight to your front!"

Nobby looked up until his neck muscles bulged.

"Whilst on active service, slovenly dressed for parade. Whilst on active service, one minute late for parade," read Padi quietly. "Sergeant Catcham."

Working up a brief spasm of professional fury, Sergeant Catcham took a pace forward.

"My report on that day, sir. This man had a button missing off his denim, sir." He spoke indignantly; his voice filled the room.



"On the same parade, in spite of me having called them all out in good time, this man was a minute late—sir!"

He took a pace to the rear.

"Whilst on active service, idle on parade." Dreading the next words, Martin wished Padi might be struck dumb. "Corporal Roule."

There was an awkward pause. Padi looked up with idle curiosity. Martin pulled himself together and took a pace forward. If he could only spit something out, anything, and get out of the place. . . .

"My r-report on that day, sir," he stammered with a dry mouth. "This man was idle—idle coming to atten-attention, sir."

There; it was out.

"Fall in again," hissed Sergeant Catcham in a whisper.

The proceedings were further held up while he took a belated pace to the rear. Another slip, and he'd be in the report again, for stating evidence idly.

"Anything to say—Clarke?"

Padi had two eyes, two ears, a bald head, and all the internal organs necessary to life. Nobby had all these, and hair on his head besides. Padi had the benefit of an expensive education, though Nobby was at no great disadvantage because of that. Each had a vote. Yet they might have belonged to two totally different species, so little did they regard each other as having in common.

"Thank you for the leave to speak, sir," muttered Nobby with an attempt at unconcern.

Like the C.O., Padi was so accustomed to this servile speech that the only time he noticed it was when a nervous guardsman omitted it.

"Yes, Clarke."

"On the first report, sir, I was bending darn to pick up my rifle, sir, when the button flew orf, sir," said Nobby. Though breathless, he spoke carefully, earnestly. "I hadn't time to sew it on, sir. On the second report, sir, I admit I was a bit late, but I went back to put the wireless orf, sir. On the last report, sir—well—I didn't quite catch the word of command."

Quick as lightning, Sergeant Catcham took a pace forward.

"May I speak, sir, please? The button was not off this man's trousers, sir, it was off his jacket pocket—sir!"

Sergeant Catcham was not the type to permit a buckshee guardsman to wipe his eye.

Padi looked remarkably fierce. Some of the stories he got were very convincing and needed all his acuteness to see through them. As far as possible he liked to be fair.

"Well, Clarke," he began, softly, "you have been here far too often lately. That's bad. It's all quite unnecessary." His voice rose gradually. "I won't have it. There's no excuse for a guardsman not having his buttons on. You must learn to keep yourself properly dressed. You've been in the company long enough to know I take a serious view of these things. I won't have it. *Do you understand?* There might be some excuse on the other reports. Yes, that's very bad. How does this man do, Sergeant-major?"

However much, in theory, Company Orders might seem obsolete, trivial and degrading, here, listening to Padi's angry tirade and demoralised by the atmosphere, Martin felt it to be a significant and indispensable business. It no longer occurred to him, as it might otherwise have done, that the loss of a button wouldn't inconvenience a man locked in battle with a Jerry, or that failure to stamp the foot at precisely the same second as the rest of the squad would decisively affect an encounter with a Nazi tank. Unfortunately, seeing Nobby had been indiscreet enough to work a flanker, as he had subsequently described it, on the Jerk at a battalion dance last week (admittedly when under the influence of Naafi beer) by taking possession of a certain girl, he knew he would not be doing too well. And he was right.

Padi's face grew graver still. The human element, as it is called, was not recognised in matters of discipline.

"One drill," he snapped.

"Fall in!" from the Jerk.

Padi glanced at the book and announced the next offender.

"Grey. Whilst on active service on the 22nd inst. untidy kit for room inspection. Whilst on active service unshaven on parade. Slovenly dressed. . . . One minute late. . . ."

To Dolly the place was full of sergeants, there to swear his life away. One of them took a pace forward and, in the monotones of a constable giving evidence at a police court, stated: "This is your report on that day, sir. This man had a blanket folded untidily on room inspection." Sergeant Catcham leapt forward to testify

in his forceful way that the accused had whiskers on his upper lip, that he had a button undone, and was late for parade. The testimony was damning. By the time the sergeants had finished bobbing forward and reeling off their evidence, Dolly began to wonder if he would escape with his life.

He heard Padi speaking: "Have you anything to say, Grey?"

Dolly had his doubts whether it was worth saying anything. However, he began: "Thank you for the leave to speak, sir"—like a horse getting over the first hurdle. "About the first charge, sir, one of my blanket labels must have been out of place, sir. It was all right when I was after leaving the barrack-room. Somebody must have pushed it over—you know! About the second charge, sir, I'd shaved in the morning." He paused. Sergeant Catcham had told him to take the bloody wrapper off the blade next time. Then he went on diffidently. "I'm growing a moustache, sir."

Padi's eyes flashed. "I'm perfectly sick of seeing you here, Grey," he snapped. "That's bad. You've been in the regiment long enough to know better. You have no sense of responsibility—and I won't have you being late for parade. Do you *understand*?"

"Yessir."

"Two drills!"

"Fall in!"

Gloomily Dolly fell in.

"And when I was after having a transfer to the Pioneers," he reflected, "they said I was too good a man to spare."

It was not often that Gelda missed a session. He had been taking the pace forward since the first day of his army career. A cunning litigant, even Padi found him a formidable opponent. Martin's own appearance at Orders as a guardsman had been a rare occurrence, but he remembered how he had envied Gelda's gift of invention, the subtle and convincing excuses he made. It was not often that Gelda was awarded more punishment than a caution. This added considerably to Martin's uneasiness.

He gave his evidence diffidently: "This is my report of that day, sir. This man was laughing on parade, sir, this afternoon, sir"—but he found it easier than the first attempt.

Padi then asked what Gelda had to say in his defence, and having formally begged permission to speak, the crafty man from Liverpool went on: "We were on parade about an hour ago, sir,

and the corporal didn't—er—make his commands very clear, sir. Then he passed a funny remark, sir, and several men laughed, like, sir. I was one of them. Later on, sir, he makes another joke. Then suddenly he turns round and tells us to stop laughing, sir. I did my best like, to comply, sir, but did not manage it in time, sir."

An uncomfortable silence followed this statement. Martin was speechless. He must say something, but what? Gelda, the rat, had done him stupid. The story had been told so sincerely, with such conviction, Martin felt that it would be useless to deny it completely. And yet there was not a word of truth in it. Gelda had been sniggering at him for giving a wrong word of command. Nervous and inexperienced, Martin was taken completely off his guard.

"Take a pace forward, man," hissed Sergeant Catcham helpfully, "and say something."

"I might have passed a humorous remark, sir," he began, then stopped. Familiarity with guardsmen was one of the worst crimes on the calendar. He had condemned himself already in Padi's eyes. "But thinking the joke was g-going too far—too far, sir," he floundered on, "I pulled this man up. He would not comply."

"It was an extremely funny remark, sir," put in Gelda, quickly. "You can't always stop laughing, like, at a minute's notice, sir."

Gelda was the master of the situation. With a burning face, Martin trembled in case Padi inquired the nature of the joke, and Gelda proceeded to recite the latest lyric circulating round the barracks. Everyone was aware of Gelda's victory.

"In the circumstances, I'll accept the explanation, Gelda," said Padi, with a faint twinkle in his eye. Then, glancing sharply at Martin: "Case explained."

The proceedings continued. Martin's sense of humiliation deepening the more he turned Gelda's triumph over in his mind. Now, for the second time he hated Gelda, his former friend—hated the Pigs. And when the Bishop's turn came, the young corporal gave his evidence with such vehemence that even Gelda looked frightened.

Eventually Martin himself was marched in, and faced his Company Commander. As he took a pace forward, he felt his heart pounding. He was intimidated, and told himself the procedure was designed to make him so. As he stood there, stiff and tense as a taught wire, he had an impulse to spring into the air

and shriek. What made it more grotesque was having to keep one's eyes rigidly to the front, whilst answering a disembodied voice somewhere down below.

The Major read the reports out, and the Jerk and Sergeant Catcham confirmed his crimes.

"Well, Corporal Roule?"—Padi spoke with a gravity that would have befitted a charge of murder.

But it was no use, Martin could think of no excuse. Let them do as they liked. Let them dust him!

"Nothing to say, sir."

"Then you ought to have something to say!" exclaimed Padi.

The lecture went on for fully ten minutes. Helpless, the victim of circumstances—Gelda's circumstance chiefly—Martin stood there, consumed with fear, bitterness, rage. He was idle. He was a bad example to the guardsmen. He was a weak disciplinarian. That was bad. Padi wouldn't have it. Did he understand? He said, "Yes." If he wanted to keep his stripes, he'd better wake up and take a hold of himself. Did he want to keep his stripes? He said, "Yes."

"Then try and behave as if you did!" thundered Padi. "This time I won't punish you. But I'm telling you to look out in future. See?"

"Fall in!"

His brain numbed, Martin marched out.

## CHAPTER XIX

"CORPORAL ROULE!"

It was Sergeant Catcham. How could the man face him with such unconcern, after having just brought about and witnessed his humiliation? But that was the way with sergeants. It was all in the day's work to them. They got you flayed and then forgot all about it—till next time. Martin admitted that there was much to be said for such an inhuman attitude. Perhaps there was *everything* to be said for it; perhaps, in the circumstances, it was the best attitude to cultivate. . . . At any rate, he was both impressed by and grateful for it now, when he found that the total lack of rancour or embarrassment in the sergeant's eye enabled him to meet it with an equal lack of rancour and

embarrassment. Nothing out of the way had happened. There was no strain at all.

"Sergeant."

"They're on swabbing now. Keep your eye on 'em. Get them cracking on the floor and the passages."

Yes, it was the way of the army, Martin reflected. If there was no rancour, there was no sympathy either—no time to readjust oneself; carry on straight away—and if you didn't carry on properly, get booked again.

Every Friday morning at about eleven o'clock, the C.O., escorted by an impressive entourage of battalion celebrities, including the Hound, the drill-sergeant, the Quartermaster, and the regimental police—or Gestapo—sergeant, began a tour of inspection of the barracks. Obviously there was not time for him to go everywhere, but the trouble was, there was no telling which of all the barrack-rooms he would descend upon. Hence the whole place had to be turned inside out in preparation. It was by far the most important event of the week, a bigger sensation than the launching of a new attack by the Eighth Army, and names were lost more quickly than bricks scattered by the impact of an exploding bomb. It may readily be imagined that more than at any other time in this world of alarms, everyone from the company commanders downward "bobbed" on the C.O.'s arrival.

From about ten o'clock onwards, therefore, the battalion began to buzz with anxiety, the Jerk no less than Gelda enquiring whether he had started; watchful heads could be observed peering cautiously from windows and hiding places; breathless rumours were flashed round of his progress from hut to hut, of which Spider he was in now, with speculations upon which he would visit next.

"Be Jasus, he done Number Four Company stupid," the whisper would circulate. "Took nearly everybody's name."

Hence on Thursday afternoon and the earlier hours of Friday morning every structure from the Naafi to an obscure lavatory at the back of the square was given the most exacting attention. No King of England had ever been so nervously anticipated.

"More bullshit," Gelda would observe. "If it was a ruddy saluting and scrubbing competition, they'd have had Jerry half-way to Berlin before I was called up. I believe it took every Red

Army man in Stalingrad for an intensive course on scrubbing, so as to leave it nice and clean for Jerry to move in."

As a corporal, it was Martin's task to supervise; at that moment corporals in every room in barracks were similarly engaged.

When he entered the Piggery, he perceived dimly through clouds of dust swirling to the ceiling and out at the windows a scene of complete chaos. In the midst of it the Pigs could be discerned in different attitudes, some with swabbing cloths, some perched on window sills cleaning the panes with metal polish, others leaning on long scrubbers, all contriving to give an impression of intense industry. How would they receive him, he wondered. Sergeant Catcham's behaviour had had upon him a fortifying, an insulating effect. He seemed to notice a slight tension.

"Come on, Corp. It takes you," said Dolly suddenly, as he assisted Gelda in getting all the beds heaped at one side of the room.

"I believe it takes him for waiting."

"The corp.-in-waiting!" exclaimed Gelda, as if Company Orders had never taken place. "We'd better keep the eye down, then. He's a desperate type. Dog-rough on him, though, with the missus coming down to-night. I'd better go and meet her, like."

"Oh, def."

"Come on, now. Get the beds back and get cracking on the floor," said Martin gruffly. Though recent events had obscured his sense of proportion, he was resolved that the last thing he would do would be to disappoint Janet, even if it meant going absent. He must see the Jerk—or the King-pin himself, the Hound.

"Yes, Sarge—I mean Corporal," replied Nobby meekly, looking sideways at Snags and winking.

"Well, if there was more nice people and not so many skivers," remarked Hooper, glancing accusingly at the Bishop and several others, "we'd soon git theer. It takes us all to muck in together."

"Same as that," from Snags.

"Tee-hee, the Corporal," jeered Gelda. "Can I scrub your bed area out, Corporal? There's no doubt about you. I seen he didn't put you in the bloody book."

"It's all right," answered Hooper unperturbed. "Nobody asked you to start bumming the load. Come on, Bishop. Gerra move on, wilt. I've been waiting of yon soap for half an hour."

Uneasily, Martin watched them a while. Though a casual

observer might have been deceived by the air of activity, closer scrutiny revealed more than a few shirkers, for the most part bluffing their way with dusters. He might have reflected that on the last swabbing parade he, too, had bluffed his way with a duster; but now it merely annoyed him to see the willing few doing most of the work.

"Come on! Get a heave on your big idle bodies," he commanded in general tones at intervals, thinking it an expression Sergeant Catcham would most likely have used. "The sooner you get down to it, the sooner you'll get it over with." If somebody came in the room and saw them idling he'd be booked again, and he wasn't going to "drop" this time.

Nobody seemed to take any notice. A swabbing roll was pinned on every barrack-room door denoting the daily and weekly tasks of the battalion personnel; though that of the Piggery was out of date, for Martin still featured on it as a window-sill duster.

Every room was responsible for a proportion of the network of passages in the Spider, which were swept and then swabbed with wet cloths before the first parade every morning, for the company commander's inspection; but on a Thursday afternoon they were scrubbed as white as butcher's tables. Unfortunately, the Piggery had also been allotted a small concrete-floored room called the Drying Room, leading off one of their passages; and, needless to say, this was a constant source of irritation. It was often pointed out by Gelda that other rooms beside the Piggery used it and should therefore "have a decco" at cleaning it.

The Drying Room had twin pipes surrounding it, connected to the boiler which served the wash-house; and so on Sundays and Wednesdays, when the water was heated, the flyer type of guardsman could be seen sneaking in at odd moments to relax, like a cat in front of fire, in its luxurious warmth, while his less opportunist comrades shivered in icy barrack-rooms.

Studying the roll, Martin noticed that Gelda and Dolly ought to have been busy on the passage instead of enjoying themselves moving beds.

The roll also showed the Bishop's chief task to be dusting the lamp-shades and keeping a brass knob on the door in a brilliant condition, while Hooper and Snags were down for swabbing the centre of the room daily. Besides the specific tasks detailed, it was



understood that each man was responsible for his own bed area.

"We've only one hand-scrubber," Snags complained. "Somebody out of the next room must have wiped our eye for it."

"Yes, and a bucket's missing parade."

Eyes turned appealingly to Martin, who stirred uncomfortably. He supposed it was up to him to replace the missing articles, and he had never been a go-getter.

Of all types of equipment, that for cleaning was the most liable to vanish into thin air. If a room were vacated for a minute, it was long enough for a hand-scrubber or a bucket to disappear, or, if the thief was more ambitious, a long scrubber. Annoying as it was when some unscrupulous person ransacked someone else's kit-bag for undergarments to "flog" in a public-house for the price of a few beers, or when another, deficient of a cap badge, removed one from the first cap he saw lying trustfully in an open locker—though it was a rare occurrence to find a cap-badge lying anywhere—such losses were not, of course, so generally inconvenient as when a despicable person with a mania for buckets and scrubbers "worked a flanker" on another room.

And even if such articles were marked and recovered, a scrubber being easily identified, the delay caused in tracing it and then waiting while an indignant guardsman pointed in triumph to a secret notch, to be confronted, perhaps, with a counterclaim in the form of another no less secret notch by the contestant, was extremely exasperating, as it meant finishing the scrubbing in one's own time after tea.

Conscious, therefore, of the difficulties of trying to persuade the occupants of another room that they were in illegal possession of a hand-scrubber, Martin was loath to begin a search. Meanwhile, work was almost at a standstill.

"The next room swiped it," persisted Snags.

"Same as that," confirmed Dolly. "Some of those fly guys would swipe the Cross from the back of Jasus and be after leaving Him marking time in mid-air."

"Well, you'd better hang on a minute," said Martin condescendingly. He hadn't the remotest idea of a solution, but felt the necessity of pretending to have one, and with a vague notion of walking round the passages to return and announce that the missing articles could not be traced, he departed slowly.

No doubt that was what they really wanted, to get him out of the way. But suddenly a thought struck him, and he hurried off.

"Bad news, this company," came Gelda's gloating voice. "I bet you a dollar he don't get one."

Martin wondered if Gelda had hidden it.

As he entered the stores, Chesty paused from scrubbing the floor and hopped over towards him.

"Step on the sacks, Corporal, please," he requested. "I've nobbut just done it, and there's so many as comes in here, it's as bad as ever in two-three minutes."

Martin made known his business. Chesty's face fell.

"You're just a second too late. I gave another corporal the last one I had."

"O.K. I thought——"

"Still, I reckon—mebbe I can finish mine after," he put in reluctantly, seeing Martin's disappointment.

"Could you? I don't want to——"

"Yebut don't go telling everybody—kind of business, or they'll all be here after scrubbers."

Returning with the spoils, Martin noticed that Gelda, who had settled down optimistically on a bed for a smoke, looked surprised, while Nobby registered disappointment. It was a triumph for authority.

"Now get on with it," said Martin. "Do you think I'm going to 'drop' again?"

"Oh, you dropped, did you, Corp?" said Gelda impudently.

Martin looked at him angrily.

Hoofer accepted the scrubber with a look of gratitude, and was soon hard at work. He seemed to have a passion for scrubbing. First he applied water liberally, then with a methodical swing of the brush produced a lather more like that from a good shaving cream than the flat, beery kind usually obtained from quartermaster's soap. Slow but thorough, Hoofer was obviously not without previous experience of scrubbing; and when he finally dried them off with the cloth, the boards had the look of newly-planed wood. Then, although every man was supposed to scrub his own bed area, Hoofer went on to Nobby's without demur, and might eventually have finished the room had not Martin thought fit to intervene.

"You'd better change the water now, Nobby, and take over."

Once again the request rather than the order. Martin reflected how easily, in spite of a good start, he fell back into this kind of weakness, and though one day, he told himself, when he had got a better grip, he would experiment with it again, at present it did not work. Nobby's reaction proved that.

"I've no time for this ruddy caper," he grumbled. "It's about time somebody made a complaint at the Mess Committee—sleeping on wet boards! I joined the Army, not the bleeding Navy."

He referred to the curious custom of electing delegates from each company to form a committee, which at regular intervals was marched before the C.O. at his Orders, to make suggestions or complaints about meals, the more daring members sometimes introducing other grievances.

"So somebody's fluffed to you at last," observed Snags. "It's about time. Gammin' on with a shammy!"

"He's badly shaken," commented the Bishop, balancing precariously at the top of a pair of step-ladders where he was trying to control a swaying lamp-shade. "I think our Cockney friend regards soap and water—I say again, soap and water—with understandable horror."

Subdued by this opposition from his own side, Nobby went reluctantly to change the dirty water.

"Bloody life this is—scrubbing," he muttered when he returned. "I always thought our army was for scrapping. I'm just about browned off with all this skivvyng. Anyone would think it was a prenatal school or something."

"Nuptial."

"Natal."

"All right, all right," said Martin hastily, seeing Nobby about to rise from his knees to pursue the argument with greater freedom. "Natal." Pacified, Nobby continued with his work.

Although the result of this minor action was scarcely due to him, Martin felt proud that his attempts so far at supervision had not been entirely unsuccessful. He now rallied his forces to tackle the two most rebelliously inclined, Gelda and Dolly, who were exchanging vivid reflections upon the Brigade of Guards whilst stirring up clouds of dust by the application of a broom to the blackout.

"I say, you two——" but either his voice failed to carry through the noise of industry or the two conspirators preferred to ignore it.

"Dolly, Gelda," he shouted. "Get on the passage."

Gelda paused.

"Who, us? Doesn't take us. That swabbing roll should have been changed last week."

Still the perfect soldier; still, whatever the circumstances, an N.C.O.'s dream of a guardsman, Snags, with rolled-up sleeves, was bustling from one job to another, shaming, by his example, a number of his comrades—but not Gelda. Gelda was without shame. Ask Snags to do anything, and one could rely upon it being done conscientiously and at once; ask Gelda, and even when all excuses were exhausted and one had got one's way, one knew it would only be half done unless he were kept under constant supervision. Once upon a time, indeed, Martin's sympathies would have gone out to this shirking rather than to Snags' conscientiousness; but not now. Gelda was a nuisance; and what with the problem of Janet on his mind and the worries of "waiting," Martin wanted none of him. But he perceived that a trial of strength was at hand, and he was damned if he'd drop again, Gelda or no Gelda. At any time now Sergeant Catcham would be along, and the passage would be untouched.

"Come on," he snapped. "Get a heave on. You've got to muck in and get it over with."

Dolly looked puzzled.

"We told you it doesn't take us," he explained earnestly. "We aren't the only ones after using the passage."

"Same as that," said Gelda.

"Somebody's got to do it, haven't they?"

Argument again! Martin cursed himself for such bad strategy. And a dangerous argument at that. Dolly agreed.

"Same as that. You'd better detail somebody."

It was anything but the accepted manner in which to address an N.C.O. Speculative eyes turned upon the new corporal. Conscious of them, he hesitated, but only for a moment. Dolly had presented him with an ultimatum; he was left with no option; it was war.

"That's what I am doing," he cried with a burst of professional fury reminiscent of Sergeant Catcham. "I'm not asking. I'm telling you! I'll give you two minutes!"

Adopting what he hoped to be a threatening attitude, he stood over them.

"Chancers of the worst type, both of 'em," commented the Bishop, blinking from the top of the ladder. "If you want two men to fall in, let me know. I'd be all for it—a hike to the guard-room."

A single bead of perspiration slid down Gelda's forehead, to glisten on the end of his nose. He was impressed, but he still hedged.

"All the scrubbers are being used. What do you want me to do it with, like, my tooth-brush?"

"Get it swept out then! Go on! Hurry up!"

"It's a dead loss this is," complained Dolly. "It would be dog-rough, too, if your man was a C.S.M."

They turned to obey, neither moving with any alacrity. First Gelda went to his kitbag to grope inside, while Dolly thought of something in his locker, both glancing sideways at Martin at intervals to see if he had forgotten about them.

"Come on! Come on!"

At last they went off to the passage, still exchanging vivid reflections upon the Brigade of Guards in general and one of its corporals in particular. Quick to exploit the diversion, Nobby was wetting the floor and furtively drying it off without scrubbing it.

A bugle call floated through the window. It had been Martin's practice to ignore these elusive melodies until some musical genius like Gelda interpreted them. After two years there was no excuse for him not knowing every call, but since only a few, such as swabs, cook-house, and taps for parade, concerned guardsmen, and these were supplemented by N.C.Os. bawling down the passages, he had never bothered his head about them. But now that he held the books, a dozen other calls could affect him—sergeants-in-waiting, corporals-in-waiting, evening orders, fire call, disperse, to mention only a few. And what on earth was this one?

Divining his dilemma, Nobby looked up at the Bishop and winked with satisfaction.

"Right! What's coming off here? You ought to be finished now. The place is in gippo. Who scrubbed this?"

Idlers took up the nearest dusters and sprang to the windows, and Nobby began to work vigorously, as Sergeant Catcham glared ominously from the doorway.

"Right! Drop everything! It's got to be done again after tea."

D'you get that? Now, everybody outside! Pick up every match stick and dog-end in the company area, every one. If I find one match stick after tea I'll stick the whole lot of you in the guard-room. Right! Get cracking!"

This was the way to get things done. They fled through the door, stifling their mutters until the sergeant was out of ear-shot.

"Right, Corporal. You'd better get down to Evening Orders. Don't forget, after tea I want you to supervise this scrubbing and see it's done properly. Got that?"

Martin swore inwardly. He was sure of one thing, he would not be here after tea.

## CHAPTER XX

IN a depressed and irritable frame of mind, Martin hurried in the direction of the orderly room, where Evening Orders was held. Every afternoon for a fortnight he had finished at four, and now, on this his first day as a corporal, when he had special reasons for wishing to get away, every conceivable obstacle was thrown in his path. Already it must be five o'clock. Having travelled nearly three hundred miles to see him, his wife would be arriving on the bus at any minute, and though but a hundred yards would separate them she must wait in vain. It was really too exasperating and ridiculous. There were dozens of other N.C.Os. about with less important engagements who could do his job. He would go and see the Hound about it as soon as Evening Orders was over. Darling Janet, his little wife, his sweetheart. . . . He pictured her standing there. How wonderful, how desirable she was!

"Corporal Roule! Corporal Roule!" Sergeant Swingham waddled up, panting.

"Where've you been, then? When you go in the mess-room to see teas up tell everybody there's a short-arm inspection straight after tea. Don't forget! These medical inspections! It's one thing after another—and tell them that anybody wearing gym vests or pants will be put in the report. Don't forget now! I'm browned off with writing names in that book." He waddled off.

See teas up! Medical inspection! Of all the offensive practices of this military life, he found the most distasteful that of having his genital organs and the hairs under his arms examined for small parasites, called "crabs." Fortnightly the personnel of the

company paraded in a barrack-room, stripped to the waist, and then in single file passed before the medical officer, raising their arms above their heads as they did so, thus allowing their pants to slip down. He supposed it was necessary, but he shrank from it.

It was called "short-arm inspection."

Walking on towards the orderly room, he was accosted by an anxious guardsman on the sleeping-out roll, who wanted to exchange his fire-picquet duty with a friend. No sooner had he dealt with him than two others with similar wishes accosted him. News of a change of possession of the books travelled with the speed of jungle telephony. *They* got what they wanted easily enough, he thought bitterly, as he made the exchanges. Yet why should a guardsman have such facilities when he hadn't? He was browned off with them all, and once more regretted the day that he had been soft enough to leave their ranks.

The sergeants and corporals-in-waiting were in groups on the orderly room verandah. Some were spinning soft "bars" to A.T.S. typists through the open windows, to the amusement of their colleagues. As the company office was the centre of local activity, the orderly room, with its adjoining offices was the heart of battalion administration.

Martin joined the group.

"Hello there," greeted a corporal whom he perceived to be Waxy. "Doing all right?"

"I suppose so. Are you?"

"Near enough. So it takes you for waiting—sergeant-in-waiting, eh? They soon got you. I got strung myself for a casual day. They got a hard neck. I made a date with a Judy for——"

"Inside!"

Drill-sergeant Hawes, known as "Skull," because of a bullet-shaped head, poked an aggressive face out of the R.S.M.'s office. Ranking in seniority between C.S.M. and R.S.M., the battalion had two drill-sergeants, who took it in turn to do waiting. Their chief function, besides harassing all subordinates, was to officiate at the different battalion parades—sick, fatigues, duty-mounting, and at Adjutant's, C.O.'s and Evening Orders. Conforming to the rule that the more important one becomes the less need there is to be agreeable, drill-sergeants walked by lonely paths, feared by all beneath them and respected by most above.

The sergeants-in-waiting, followed by the new corporal, dived into the small office bearing the dreaded letters "R.S.M.," shared by the Hound and the drill-sergeants. The door closed, and, suddenly overcome by his proximity to Skull Hawes, Martin found his knees beginning to shake. He had thought for a moment of broaching his domestic difficulties to him; but he had no sooner entered the presence of this almost fabulous monster and sadistic tyrant, unrivalled except by the Hound, than he knew that that was out of the question.

"Where's your sergeant-in-waiting?"

Skull's conversational voice vibrated like a saw on cast iron.

"At—at the conference, sir."

Abruptly the drill-sergeant opened the duty book and began to check the daily details. Martin fervently hoped that his own would prove to be in order.

"Sergeant Garrity for barrack guard."

"Number Four, sir."

"Corporal Kershaw for barrack guard."

"Number One, sir."

"Sergeant Catcham for canteen duty."

A curious thing happened. Martin's mouth went through the motions of speech, but no sound came.

The grating saw became an electric drill. Skull threw a regimental fit.

"For God's sake, who owns him? Does nobody? I've seen him wandering about here for twelve months. Isn't he squadded yet or something?"

"N-number Threé, sir."

"Then say so!"

"Yes, sir."

"Six men for barrack guard."

Skull's wrath subsided as quickly as it had risen.

"N—number Three, sir."

When the fatigues—more often than not found by H.Q.—were disposed of, a list of names for dental treatment had to be checked, in order that each sergeant might write those concerning him upon his detail.

"Who owns Devon?" demanded Skull suddenly.

Simultaneously half a dozen books were opened at the page



containing the nominal roll, and as many fingers sped down the columns of names, rivalling the adroitness of no less an expert than Tabs, the company clerk. Martin in his anxiety could find every other roll—married quarters, guards, picquets—except the one he needed. Long after the remainder had ceased, his pages were still rustling, as disturbingly to his nervous senses as leaves whipped up by a sudden breeze to break the silence of a dark night. Feeling Skull's fish-like eyes settled upon him, he became more and more confused among the rolls.

"Find it for him! Find it for him! For god's sake, Sergeant, find it for him before I chase him round the table. Corporals! How I love them!"

Suddenly stung by these callous remarks, one of Martin's bursts of rage seized him, and flinging his book into the hands of the sergeant next to him, he looked at Skull with all the dumb insolence he could muster. It wasn't much of a protest, but it was enough to get him marched straight to the guard-room. However, one could never foretell Skull's behaviour. Reminiscent of a snake in the grip of hilarity, a cold amusement flickered over the drill-sergeant's eyes.

Rigby, Jones, Jameson . . .

It went on for about five minutes, the sergeant-in-waiting next to Martin somehow contriving to divide his gaze to scan his own and Martin's roll at the same time.

As abruptly as he had opened it the drill-sergeant closed the duty book, a signal for all to dive outside and hurry away.

Released from the oppressive force of Skull's personality, Martin came away in the lowest dejection of spirits he had yet reached. What was the use? What was the use? How could one take one's requests to people like that? One might as well ask a favour of a brick wall—and they were all the same, the Jerk, the Hound, bullying, heartless, inhuman; the higher they climbed the worse they became. And that was the road he had set his foot on—the road to the Jerk, Skull, the Hound. With a sour cynicism, he thought of his ambitions, to be human, to be different. Innocent, idle dreams! Let down by one's friends below, nagged and bullied by those above, one went the same, the inevitable way. The system itself was heartless; it was futile to struggle against it. And in any case, he thought mournfully and confusedly, he was

no good, he would never be any good, had made a mess of everything he'd tried to do, he was not the stuff of which N.C.Os. were made. It was a comfort, anyway, to know that. But, in that case, why go on? His mind reverted enviously to the three guardsmen whose exchanges he had just sanctioned. Why should he put up with a lot so much worse than theirs for the sake of an authority he wasn't fitted to exercise and, anyway, did not particularly want? Rebellion, which he had so recently curbed in the Piggery, entered his own mind again. Why submit to all these burdens, this unreasonableness? Bloody books! Why not pitch them into the gutter? He'd do a nip and go and meet Janet and hang his stripes? But even while his mind played lovingly with the thought, he knew that they had so ground down his mind, no less than his body, that he was afraid to go absent.

Preoccupied with these dark but half-hearted thoughts of insubordination, oblivious to his surroundings, he began to cross the road; and it would, no doubt, have been a suitable end, at that moment, to his military career if he had been run over by the Hound on his bicycle. For that is what nearly happened. The Hound dismounted. Gimlet eyes bored into Martin.

"Come here, Corporal!"

The monstrous moustache jerked in his direction and back again so swiftly that it gave the illusion of being on a swivel.

"Come into my office!"

Pale with guilt, like a lamb to the slaughter, Martin followed.

"I saw you this afternoon."

Martin blushed.

"You made a complete fiasco of it, Corporal—a complete fiasco. Yes, I was watching you."

The Hound sat down and rubbed his hands. There was no trace of an accent in his voice; his intonation was dry and colourless.

"Sir," said Martin humbly.

"Well, Corporal Roule, I know what it is, I can assure you. I've been through the same stages as yourself, a young corporal. I know all about it. It's a big change, but it's also a big chance. Don't let it get you down and I can assure you you won't regret it."

The Hound spoke almost paternally. Had he been kissed, Martin could not have been more staggered. He gulped. He was overwhelmed with gratitude, but only half of him. The other

baser, shrewder Martin was estimating the situation, seeking the psychological moment to get in while the Hound was off his guard. The plans and hopes he had just denounced sprang up again in his heart.

"Yes, sir."

"You'll find it hard at first. But keep on going."

"Yes, sir."

The moment had come.

"I beg your pardon, sir. My wife came down from the North to see me to-day, sir, and I've been put on a casual day. Could I——"

Discreetly his voice trailed off; he had calculated it nicely. It reassured him to recall that the Hound slept out of barracks.

"Did you tell the sergeant-in-waiting?"

Such a simple thing had never occurred to him.

"N-no, sir."

"There you are, then! That was the proper course to adopt. But I'll see him in the mess. Take the books back to the company and fall out!"

"Sir."

"And get your hair cut—be at Adjutant's Orders to-morrow. Understand?"

"Sir."

Jubilant, elated, his spirits soaring up like a bird on the wing, Martin took the verandah steps in a single stride and flew to the Spider.

In less than two minutes he was at the guard-room, where he had to give his name as security before going "out town", and in front of which, blue with cold, bored with the dreariness of his occupation, and irritated by the chin-strap of his steel helmet and the collar of his rough greatcoat, which rubbed and rasped his face, a sentry paced eleven steps up and down, stamping his heels to revive his circulation as he turned about. No doubt he had known the warmth and comfort of a cosy home, but the only ambition which stirred him now was that of getting back inside the bare, draughty guard-room the moment his two hours were up. At intervals he stole a look at the clock above the door, and cursed the slothfulness of time.

Inside it was slightly warmer, but not enough to prevent the

sergeant of the guard from stopping every now and then to rub his hands and wipe the continual flow of dewdrops from his nose, as in shaky handwriting he filled in numerous forms and reports for the R.S.M. and the C.O.

But whatever the temperature, it always seemed cold on guard. A precocious little drummer boy on duty there made toast in front of a stove for which he had stolen coal from the battalion dump. To complete the happy picture, five guardsmen dressed in greatcoats, straps and pouches, ready to be called out at a moment's notice, lay on their backs on bare iron bedsteads, hands in pockets, too tired from their twenty-four hours of "two on and four off," too chilled from the winter air, to have any thoughts or feelings left of any kind. Better off were a few prisoners in the cells.

"They've no worries," Gelda would mutter when on guard, jerking his thumb in the direction of the cells; "no bleeding duties. Use their loaves, they do, lapping it up while we get the balls frozen off us artside. It don't pay to go straight, like, in the ruddy army."

When he had given his name, and two cigarettes unobtrusively to a prisoner he had known earlier in his army career, Martin passed to the glorious freedom of beyond the gates. It was half-past five. He was only half an hour late. A group of people stood on the opposite side of the road, waiting for a bus. His eager eyes instantly distinguished his wife, who saw him at the same moment and moved slightly away from the others.

After all he had endured, at last his haven. Tears sprang in his eyes. She came towards him. It was one of the happiest moments of two lives, and except for an inquisitive look from the sentry, the world went on in ignorance of it.

"Been waiting long?"

"No," she replied.

"There's a bus coming."

"You're just in time."

It was a silent, tedious journey, punctuated by secret hand-squeezes. But it was soon over. They de-bussed by the "Star," a notable licensed landmark, and proceeded by dusky lanes towards the address given by Chesty. In a secluded place they stopped by mutual consent, and suddenly he was clinging to her.

"My darling."

He hung on silently, burying his head in her shoulder.

"My poor darling."

His eyes opened and saw the bare trees swaying in the cold wind.

"They gave me two stripes to-day."

He tried to be casual, but she knew how to read him.

"Yes," she said patiently. She did not show anything of her disappointment that his first thought had not been about herself and their baby.

"I didn't want to, really, you know."

"Of course not, dearest."

"It's awfully difficult. I don't want to be like those others—hated, feared. . . ."

"Nobody will ever fear you, sweetheart. Nobody could hate you—not if you had a dozen stripes," she answered. "It's bound to be hard at first. But you'll get through."

"Damn them. I'll show them," he suddenly cried. Though he was not clear whom he would show—Gelda or Sergeant Catcham.

An army lorry careered round the corner, tooting impatiently. Laughing, they began to walk towards the address given by Chesty.

## CHAPTER XXI

IT was several months later, and somewhere the Second World War still raged with unabated ferocity. From out of the mist came the martial beat of a drum and the crunching of boots upon the rough road, mingled with cries of: "By the right! Your army right! Come on, now. Let the right arms go!"

As the head of the column loomed out of the haze, the villagers paused to stare with idle curiosity at the tall, straight, drilled figures of the marching men. Common as soldiers were, one could not resist a second and a third look at these superb fellows, moving forward with a precision and a unity unequalled by any other regiment they had ever seen.

"It's the Guards," said an old man with pride. "They might be all spit and polish, but you can tell a guardsman anywhere. The Guards—"

"Left, right; left, right. Come on! Swing 'em straight from front to rear—"

"Smart chaps, them," said another onlooker reminiscently. "I mind the time at Ypres, in the last war—"

"Give us your gun," cried some excited urchins, struggling to keep pace.

On they came through the village, the crunching of boots growing louder and louder until it filled the narrow street and temporarily suspended all the numerous village activities, as shoppers, shopkeepers, pedestrians, errand boys stood silently to watch the magnificent procession pass.

"Am I talking to myself, then?" demanded a sergeant. "Keep the step—Gelda!"

Gelda quickly shuffled into step.

"Swing your right arm up, Clarke! Reach up, man!"

As if electrified, Nobby's right arm shot up.

"Desperate type," he muttered under his breath.

"There's some nice people that's sergeants," said Hooper dubiously.

"Be Jasus, they're all the same," returned Dolly. "It's dog-rough this mob is."

"Extremely rough," agreed the Bishop.

"Ah, well, we'll git theer."

"Cut the talking out!" thundered the sergeant. "Another word and I'll put you all in open arrest—left, right! Left, right! That's better. Keep it up. Keep your right arm going, Clarke! Reach up! That's good, Snags."

The Jerk permitted his facial muscles to relax into what, fifteen years ago, might have been thought a smile; when it came to keeping arms swinging and making men reach up, Sergeant Roule left little to be desired.

"Come on," urged the sergeant. "You aren't out town with the A.T.S. now. Look like soldiers, will you! It'll soon be taking us for the real thing. Soon be taking us to storm the shores of France. Left, right! Left, right! Left . . ."

A thought occurred to him, and he left his position at the rear of the platoon to draw up alongside the Bishop.

"I believe you're an artist," he remarked icily. "Is it you that's been turning your talent on to me on the lavatory walls? Well, I'm warning you—and tell your pals!"

On, on they marched until the last platoon was swallowed up again in the morning mist that lay upon the country fields beyond.

THE END



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